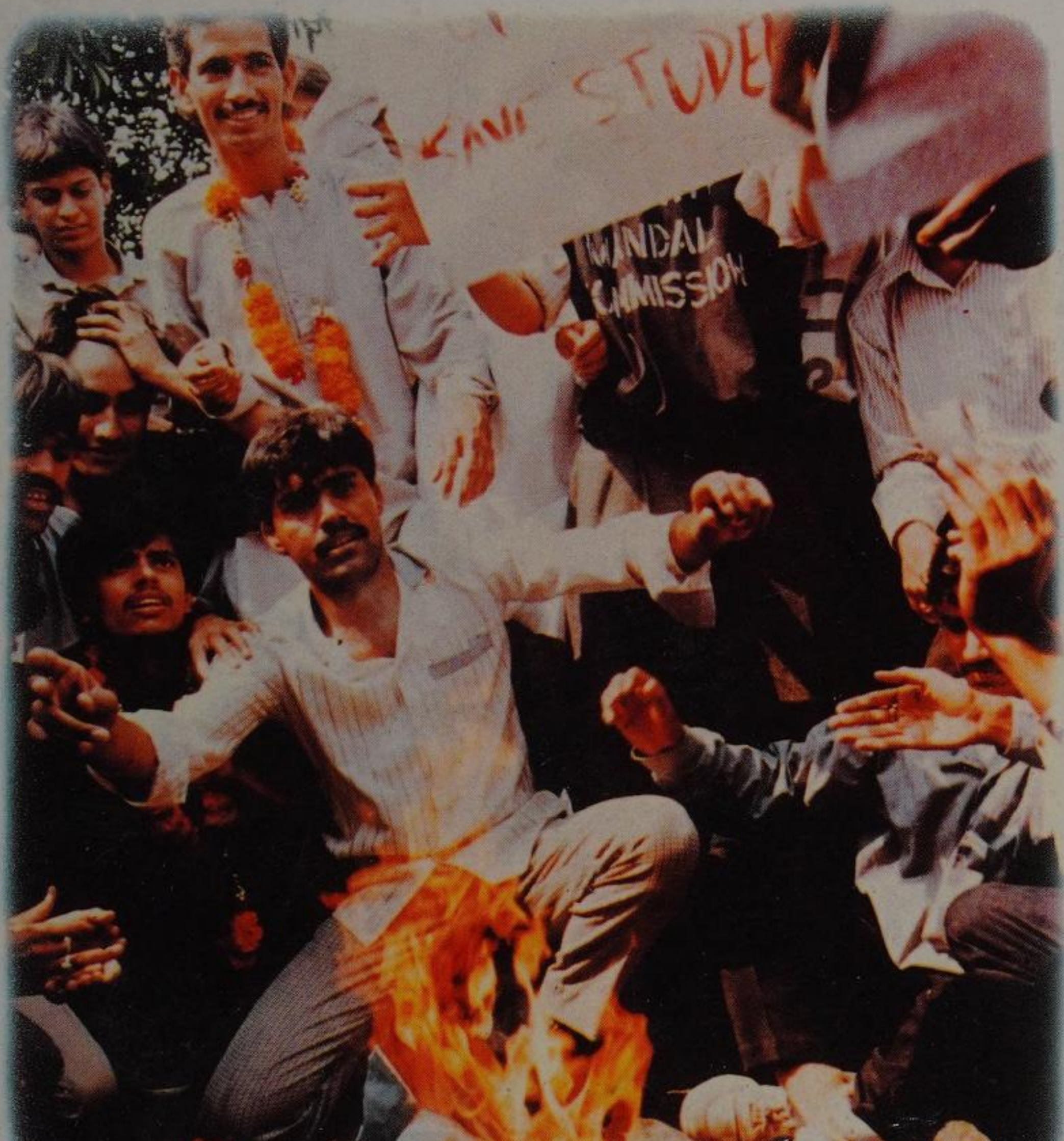
CASTE

ITS TWENTIETH CENTURY AVATAR



EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY

M. N. SRINIVAS

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As India attempts to modernize and ready itself for the twenty-first century, the issue of caste takes on an overwhelming importance. What form does caste take today? How can its debilitating aspects be countered? Does the future promise more and virulent forms of caste-based discrimination and conflict? *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, edited and introduced by one of India's most eminent sociologists, attempts to answer these and other crucial questions.

The essays in this volume, each authored by an expert on the subject, include a stimulating assessment of the role of women in perpetuating caste; incisive analyses of the relationship between caste and the economy, and between caste and Hinduism; a study of the decline of the age-old jajmani system and its effect on caste in rural India; a review of the backward class movements in Tamil Nadu since the time of the British; a commentary on the power struggle in U.P. and Bihar amongst the backward castes; a study of the change in self-perception of rural Mahars who converted to Buddhism; comments on the relevance of sociological research in judicial decision-making and the relationship between efficiency and job reservation; observations on caste amongst Muslims and Christians in India and critiques of the Mandal Commision Report and the Mandal judgement.

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Caste

Its Twentieth Century Avatar

Edited and Introduced by
M. N. Srinivas

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The symposium was edited during my tenure as the J.R.D. Tata Visiting Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Bangalore whose excellent facilities I have made use of. I could not have wished for a more congenial atmosphere than the one at NIAS. I would like to express my thanks to Dr Raja Ramanna, Director, my other academic colleagues, and all members of the administrative staff of the Institute.

The Department of Sociology, University of Bombay, is celebrating the birth centenary of Professor G. S. Ghurye, one of the founding fathers of sociology in India, and also a pioneer in the analysis of the changing role of caste. This book on caste by a younger generation of scholars is dedicated to the memory of G. S. Ghurye and all the other scholars who have contributed to the understanding of this enduring, baffling, complex, controversial, and fascinating institution.

National Institute of Advanced Studies *M. N. Srinivas*
Bangalore
18 October 1995

INTRODUCTION

M. N. Srinivas

There has been a great deal of writing on caste beginning from the early periods of Indian history, but the writers have invariably been men. It is only in recent years that women scholars such as the late Irawati Karve and Professor Pauline Kolenda, to mention but two, have written on the subject. Valuable as these writings are, they do not look at the institution from the point of view of women. I thought that it was time that this deficiency was rectified, and I am glad that Professor Leela Dube responded to my request to rectify matters. Her essay 'Caste and Women' meets this need. It has been placed at the head of this volume in order to emphasize the need for looking at the hoary institution of caste from the point of view of women.

Each essay in this collection represents a contribution to the understanding of one or more aspects of caste by a specialist. Caste can no longer be treated as a subject of interest only to social scientists and the media. Policies regarding the quantum and details of reservation are matters of great interest to the people at large, politicians and officials.

Much has been written on the link between caste and occupation but here again, as in other areas, the emphasis has been on the male dimension. The occupational contribution of women has generally received only cursory treatment when it has not been totally ignored.

Since the 1950s, the concepts of purity and impurity have been seen as central to caste not only in indicating the rank of a jati in the local hierarchy but also in several other areas. Women are more directly concerned with purity-impurity than men, and the kitchen may be described as the heart of the purity-impurity system. (Remember Vivekananda's condemnation of folk Hinduism as a

religion of the kitchen!) It is women who have to prepare and serve the food, and among many castes they have to be ritually pure while handling food. The rank of a caste depends on the avoidance of some impure foods (and liquor). Food is an important part of domestic ritual — daily, life-cycle and calendrical — and the ritual varies according to caste and domestic traditions. Women are expected to know the special foods that need to be prepared for each important ritual, and women are the *de facto* custodians of tradition.

Punishment for the violation of the rules of purity-impurity in matters of food and sex operate far more harshly against women than men. As Leela Dube puts it, 'Sexual asymmetry (between men and women) is bound up with the maintenance of the hierarchies of caste.' Also, 'Caste is not dead. Gender is a live issue. The principles of caste inform the nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society, and hierarchies of caste are articulated by gender.'

Recent research has proved abundantly that caste in pre-British India was not a totally rigid institution. It was possible for strategically located groups to move up in the local hierarchy through the capture of political power, the acquisition of land, through trade, and through migration to other regions. But such mobility always resulted in the loss of 'freedom' for women. High status, whether acquired through caste, or the ownership of wealth, meant that women were confined to the home and subjected to a harsh sex code. Pre- and extra-marital sex led to the loss of caste for women of the higher castes, and widowhood implied a life of perpetual mourning. In extreme cases, she committed sati.

While the part played by caste in politics, especially in the context of elections, agitations for enhanced reservation of seats in higher education or government jobs for backward classes, and the inclusion or omission of particular castes in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) or Scheduled Castes (SC) list, have been commented upon by scholars and journalists, the study of the relation between caste and the economy has not received adequate attention. Professor Panini explores this important relationship in his essay, 'The Political Economy of Caste'.

In the complex political economy of modern India, caste continues to provide a support base for members, a fact which is particularly important for upwardly mobile villagers who seek salaried jobs in the urban bureaucracy, industries, firms and offices. The articulation of kin, caste and patron-client ties are crucial to spatial and social mobility. In the words of Panini, '. . . the membership of a caste implies that a person becomes part of a person-based social network which controls insiders' information about economic opportunities, transmits skills, and provides varied types of human and material support.' This particular role of caste has been steadily gaining importance in the last 150 years or more, with new economic opportunities becoming available in India and abroad. In the context of developments in the country since Independence, Panini points out that the regime of economic control (intrinsic to socialism and centralized planning) has contributed to the strengthening of caste ties by encouraging, albeit indirectly, the growth of the unorganized sector.

Socialism, central planning, a vast public sector both at the centre and in the states, a state-controlled educational system etc., have facilitated the pursuit of an employment policy in which political considerations have played an important part, with efficiency becoming a secondary issue if not a casualty. Thanks to the policy of protective discrimination, the weaker sections of the population have developed vital stakes in a state-controlled economy, and they are also aware of the clout they wield over politicians. But the new political and economic winds favour a reduced role for the state in economic matters: 'Hence the hard-won battle for backward classes' reservation will prove meaningless if the government retreats from the commanding heights of the economy, and if it sheds many of the regulatory and control functions. Such steps would not only reduce the number of posts in the government but diminish the authority vested in government jobs.'

Until recently, the 'central services', in particular, the prestigious Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Indian Police Service (IPS), have been attracting some of the ablest graduates in the country. But with liberalization and privatization, it seems likely

that government and public sector jobs will become less attractive. This will not happen only because of wide disparities in salaries. As of now, 50 per cent of jobs in the Union Government and Central Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) are reserved for the weaker sections, and there are moves to increase the reservation to 62 per cent or more. In the southern states, particularly Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, reservation reaches 70 per cent or more. And only the very rich can buy seats for their offspring in the 'capitation fee' institutions. As a result, the more informed among the middle classes are sending their offspring to institutions abroad even for an undergraduate degree, and no one seems to be concerned at the brain drain that this means for the country.

Panini mentions the possibility of a 'backlash from the caste system' putting an end to liberalization. This is not unlikely in spite of the occasional brave statements from spokesmen for the Central Government that the 'reforms are irreversible.' A call to put an end to the present less-than-wholehearted liberalization might attract support from a few political parties and vested interests. This is particularly likely when general elections are only a few months away. The only positive sign is that chief ministers of all political hues are going abroad to attract foreign capital and expertise. In the process, they have conjured up visions of prosperity for their respective states, which have reached the people, the voters. Chief ministers have also grasped the fact that liberalization also implies more decentralization.

In 'Caste and Hinduism', Dr Jayaram makes the point that castes may be viewed either as '. . . functionally interrelated in a *system* contributing to the vertical integration of a rigidly stratified society, or as autonomous *groups* serving common purposes and striving for common ends. Viewed as the former, caste constitutes a *structural principle* of society, and viewed as the latter, it acts as a *dynamic force* in interest articulation, collective mobilization and social movement. While changes in the institution of caste can be comprehended fairly easily from either of these analytical perspectives, the relationship between the realities subsumed by them is complex and eludes analytical grasp.' However, there is

no doubt that the two systems are linked in a variety of ways. For instance, upwardly mobile villagers need the help of their fellow-castemen (and fellow villagers in towns) to obtain access to urban facilities and resources, while the urban-dweller might need village contacts to provide him with servants, help him secure a bride for his son, and to expand his business or trade. And if he has political ambitions, he needs to keep in close contact with his rural base. Further, caste organizations depend heavily on the cooperation of villagers when they need to put pressure on politicians and the government to extract various favours from the latter.

There are differences between rural and urban castes but the members of the same caste living in a region come together on occasions of common concern. A caste is an elastic body, the group being smaller for endogamy than, for instance, for pressing its right to claim backward class status. I have earlier referred to this phenomenon as the 'horizontal stretch' of castes, and while this is most visible in the case of 'dominant castes', it is seen in other castes also. Commenting on the government's goal of bringing about a 'casteless and classless society', Jayaram comments tersely, 'Caste is not being abolished — at least in the short run — but made to stand on its head.' The political rhetoric of modern India drowns the fact that large numbers of people born into the higher castes are poor and backward and they resent the fact that members of the OBCs enjoy concessions and benefits which are denied to the former. Even more noticeably, there is widespread resentment at the benefits enjoyed by SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and this is likely to rise sharply as the Dalits become more militant. The envy of the Dalits is particularly high among the castes just above the pollution line.

Jayaram has remarked that '. . . one can argue that castes and the caste system can survive the purity-impurity ideology, and the institution of caste can even survive Hinduism.' But before discussing Jayaram's prediction regarding the future, it must be made clear that Hinduism is not in any danger of disappearing. Far from it, Hinduism seems to be thriving and getting increasingly involved in politics and social work. A few social scientists have

said that the character of Hinduism is changing, that it is becoming 'semiticized' as a result of its contact with various forces — religious, political and cultural — in the modern world. However, this issue does not concern us here.

In 'Caste in Contemporary Rural India', Dr Karanth comments on the decline of the jajmani system of local production and exchange, especially in agriculturally prosperous areas. Such a decline indicates a fundamental change, for jajmani had endowed caste with durability through the millennia, protecting it from ideological attacks on the system. As long as the mode of production at the village was caste-based, denunciations of inequality from saints and reformers, or from those professing other faiths, proved ineffective. It was only when, along with ideological attacks on caste, education and employment were made accessible to all, and urbanization and industrialization spread, that systemic changes occurred in caste.

Karanth has pointed out that it is easier for castes above the pollution line to change their occupations than it is for the SCs, for the work they do, while indispensable, is regarded as defiling. Other castes would refuse to do the same kind of work. The SCs have no choice but to do it, for the dominant castes will punish noncompliance with all the means at their disposal.

As things stand at present, welfare measures designed for SCs reach them only through their dominant caste patrons, which only increase the latter's power over their clients. Officials do not generally like to antagonize local leaders whose help is sought in achieving targets fixed by their superiors in the state capital or New Delhi. Dr Karanth finds that caste in rural India is not a static phenomenon and is characterized by mobility. Further, Sanskritization is an integral part of mobility and this is also true of SCs. He also notes the familiar phenomenon of castes claiming to be high in a traditional context, and 'backward' in the context of the struggle for getting access to education and government jobs. Also, while some sections of the SCs opt for Sanskritization in order to move up, others emphasize their Dalit identity and adopt a

confrontationist attitude towards the higher castes and the society as a whole.

Most interestingly, the Sanskritization of SCs embodies a strong element of protest against the high castes: 'We dare you to stop us emulating you' seems to be the spirit underlying emulation. In other words, both Sanskritization and emulation challenge the position and authority of higher castes.

A brief comment on the Bhakti movement is in order here. It was a powerful movement which surfaced in various parts of the subcontinent over several centuries. It was anti-caste, pro-poor, pro-women, anti-élitist, anti-Sanskrit, and affirmed that genuine love of god was sufficient to achieve salvation. Esoteric knowledge and the performance of elaborate rituals and sacrifices were not needed. The Bhakti movement attracted large numbers of the lower castes and the poor and lowly, including women. But the important point to note here is that membership of a Bhakti cult meant mobility for those who joined it.

But paradoxical as it may seem, in spite of its anti-caste, anti-Sanskrit and anti-élitist stance, the Bhakti movement spread values such as vegetarianism and teetotalism — both characteristic of the highest castes — and the importance of religion and spirituality, among the people at large. To crown the paradox, the message of Bhakti, that simple and unalloyed devotion to god was enough for salvation, was also the central message of the Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the most influential Hindu scripture antedating the Bhakti movement by a few centuries.

The 'backward classes movement' as it is now generally referred to, had its origins in the 'non-Brahmin Conference' held in Madras in 1916 by the leaders of non-Brahmin castes in the sprawling, multi-lingual Madras Presidency. The term 'non-Brahmin' was interpreted widely. It included not only Hindus, but Muslims and Christians as well. The leaders were from the élite sections of their respective communities. All of them were united in their resentment of the dominance of Brahmins — a three per cent minority — in higher education, in the new professions, and in the bureaucracy. Brahmin dominance in these new areas was attributed to their being

the highest caste and to their using that position to exploit the others and keep them ignorant. Reservations were demanded to offset the disadvantages suffered by the 97 per cent non-Brahmins. This was necessary, they believed, for rendering justice to the lower castes, and the party formed by these non-Brahmin leaders came to call itself the 'Justice Party'. It demanded reservation of seats in the legislature constituted under the reforms introduced by the Government of India Act 1919 (popularly known as the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms). Subsequently the party was able to obtain 28 out of the 98 elected seats in the legislature declared as 'reserved'. It scored another victory in November 1927 when what came to be known as the 'Communal G.O.' was passed by the government in Madras, earmarking the share of each caste category in government jobs. Thus in a unit of 12 jobs, five were allocated to non-Brahmin Hindus, two each to Brahmins, Anglo-Indians and Christians, and Muslims, and one to 'others'.

That benefits earmarked for the really 'backward' go to the better off among the OBCs was obvious even in 1956 when the first Backward Classes Commission submitted its report. It made a distinction between the 'backward' and the 'more backward' to make sure that the latter were not deprived of their share of benefits. The southern states, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, have divided the OBCs into various categories of backwardness in order to make sure that each category gets a share. Dr Radhakrishnan's essay 'Backward Classes Movement in Tamil Nadu' illustrates in a classic manner the difficulties inherent in trying to make sure that benefits reach the most deprived groups. *Every* caste is divided into higher and lower divisions, and the lower feels that the higher hogs the benefits. This occurs even at the level of the 'Untouchables'. For instance, in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the Scheduled Castes are divided into Right-hand and Left-hand groups and the latter complain that they do not receive their share of benefits. (I suppose ideally they would like their share to be clearly specified.) This is not the only problem though: 'Untouchable' converts to Christianity have been agitating for years to be classified as SCs. They consider it unjust that they are denied

the benefits of SC status which Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist SCs are accorded. And there are small groups in each state which complain that they have not been given the SC status owing to some bureaucratic error or political skulduggery.

As far back as 1923, M. C. Rajah, a leader of the Depressed Classes (present SCs, Dalits) clearly saw that his followers had not benefitted from the Communal G.O. He asked, 'Why should the Depressed Classes remain hewers of wood and drawers of water and the caste Hindus, their lords for ever . . .' and argued for 30 per cent reservation (for DCs) in the services. He also demanded, for the Depressed Classes, 'Compulsory education with provision for [a] noon meal; compulsory allowance to parents who [had] lost the services of wage-earning children, liberal fee remissions in schools and colleges and free hostels.' (In retrospect it is obvious that M. C. Rajah was far ahead of his times in articulating the needs of the Depressed Classes and of the other very poor people in rural India, and it is a sad commentary on India's performance since Independence that the needs spelt out by Rajah have not yet been met.)

And even within the non-Brahmin category there were several castes which felt that they had not received their share of benefits. To take a conspicuous example, the Vanniyakula Kshatriyas (known in the 1930s as Padayachis), a large agricultural caste in the northern districts of the present Tamil Nadu, constituted 12 per cent of the population of the state but felt all along that they had not benefitted from reservation. Large numbers of the Vanniyars were landless labourers, and their economic condition was not very different from those of the local SCs. The Vanniyars were envious of the benefits enjoyed by the SCs, and this occasionally led to clashes between the two. Another characteristic of the Vanniyars was their social and political activism. Resenting their traditional name of Padayachi (soldier), they changed the caste name to Vanniyakula Kshatriya, and also formed the Tamil Nadu Toilers' Party, displaying the Janus-faced nature of the attempts of 'lower' castes to move up, claiming high caste status in a traditional context and a low one in the fierce struggle for access to scarce resources. In recent years,

the Vanniyar movement has become more militant. They have formed a political party, Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), claiming that they constitute 28 per cent of the population of Tamil Nadu, and demanding 20 per cent reservation of jobs and educational seats in the state, and two per cent reservation in Central Government jobs. They resort to strikes and bandhs, erecting road blocks and damaging public property. (A very senior and respected Tamil Nadu politician denounced the statistics produced by the Vanniyars as 'rubbish'.)

As of now, 'compartmental reservation' prevails in Tamil Nadu by which out of 50 per cent reservation for the Other Backward Classes (comprising 2021 communities representing 67 per cent of the state's population), 20 per cent has been set apart for the *most backward* section, including 39 communities within the OBC list, and 68 'denotified tribes'. In all, the 'most backward' section comprises 107 communities, amounting to 36 per cent of the OBC population. The less backward section comprises 94 communities which have 30 per cent reservation. Vanniyars constitute 53 per cent of the population of the 'most backward' section which means that they are likely to get a sizeable share of the 20 per cent reservation.

To sum up, the 'non-Brahmins' of Tamil Nadu continue to be an extremely heterogeneous group even after the reorganization of the states in 1956, when the multilingual and sprawling Presidency shrank into a much smaller Tamil-speaking state. The main Hindu population of the state comprises a minority of forward castes while the majority are split into 'Backward' and 'More Backward'. A Constitutional Amendment was introduced in 1994 at the behest of the Tamil Nadu government providing for a total of 69 per cent reservation for the weaker sections of the population including the SCs, STs and OBCs, in the matter of educational facilities and government jobs in the state. Further, the Amendment has been included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution in order to protect these reservations from being challenged in the courts. But the Amendment runs counter to the prevailing judgement of the Supreme Court which has ruled that reservations shall not exceed

50 per cent.

According to Dr Meenakshi Jain ('Backward Castes and Social Change in UP and Bihar'), while there are internal contradictions and conflicts in the kind of alliances which the parties in power in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have forged, 'the backward castes as a whole refuse to align [themselves] with any set-up that does not concede them total supremacy. Though not coherent enough to capture power on their own, they are powerful enough to prevent others from forming a rival stable order.' This comment perhaps provides the clue to the continuance of the present governments in UP (Samajwadi) and Bihar (Janata Dal). Yadavs may rebel against Jats, Kurmis challenge Yadavs, and 'lower Shudras' turn against 'upper Shudras' but all seem to be united against the 'forward' castes. If the alliance among the OBCs is so conflict-ridden, how will an alliance between the OBCs and the SCs and STs fare? The SCs are represented by the Bahujan Samaj Party whose leaders want to make it known that their ideology and programme is different from those of the OBCs represented by the Samajwadi Party in UP. The minorities, in particular the Muslims, have problems and interests which at best only partially overlap with those of the OBCs and SCs. But it is precisely this assortment of people with divergent and conflicting interests that the Janata Dal and Communist parties are targeting for winning the elections.

In the last Assembly elections held in UP in 1993 a few upwardly mobile backward castes such as the Lodhas and Keoris in Western UP voted for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the case of the Lodhas the fact that Kalyan Singh, later the Chief Minister of UP under BJP rule, was a Lodha, may have been a factor for voting for the BJP, perhaps not the sole one. The BJP seems to be seen as the party of urban traders and middle classes, and it is understandable that upwardly mobile members of the 'lower castes' want to become part of the middle classes.

According to Meenakshi Jain, it was the implementation of land reform legislation by the Congress party in the post-Independence years that led to the party's decline in the Hindi region. Quoting from the work of the Rudolphs, she makes the point that as a result

of the Zamindari Abolition laws, twenty million tenants became landowners. 'Tenancy fell from 60 to 25 percent, and the percentage of owner-cultivators increased from 40 to 75. Despite charges of large-scale evasion and tenant eviction, the State acquired 14 million acres for distribution in addition to large amounts of privately held grazing, forest and waste land' (L. I. Rudolph and S. H. Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi,* Orient Longman, India, 1987, p. 315).

Jain summarizes the changes as follows: 'The displacement of large landowners by middle farmers may be accurately described as one of the most significant developments of the post-Independence period . . . A direct result of the emergence of middle farmers as a powerful pressure group was the decline of the Congress in North India, and after 1967, South and West India became the bastion of the Congress.'

A widespread impression has been created that the 'backward classes are poor and powerless, and that they need the support and protection of the state in order to have access to education, government jobs, etc.' In the first place, as pointed out earlier, the backwards are a most heterogeneous category and those at the top are substantial landowners, and wield a lot of power. According to Jain '. . . few groups in independent India have made progress on a scale comparable to these castes. At least since the 1960s the backward castes, *or more specifically the upper sections of the backwards, have been key players in the politics of northern India'* (emphasis mine). Jain is here expressing an important truth and the people at large are aware of it, but it has missed recognition in academic discussions on social change.

Jain has observed that 'The Upper Shudras have so far shown reluctance to share power with their weaker brethren (the Lower Shudras, who in fact constitute 40 per cent of the backward caste population).' This observation needs comment: All over the country the power of the dominant castes is now being challenged by certain castes traditionally considered lower to them. The latter are, by and large, less affluent than the former but adult franchise has empowered them and they enjoy numerical strength in certain areas where they exhibit their militancy. Thus Kolis are challenging the

Patidars in parts of Gujarat, Kapus are challenging Kammas and Reddis, and Kurmis and Keoris are challenging the Jats, Gujars and Yadavs. The conflict between the old dominants and the emerging ones gets very sharp where the former cling to their backward status, as has happened in Karnataka where the Lingayats and Okkaligas, who together constitute nearly a third of the state's population, refuse to give up their OBC status.

According to Dr Neera Burra ('Buddhism, Conversion and Identity'), the self-perception of the Mahars has changed in the last four decades or more. While this is true of all Mahars, a distinction needs to be made between rural and urban Mahars in the way in which this self-perception expresses itself. While rural Mahars resent caste inequalities, they have to take note of the economic, political and even physical power of the local, landowning high castes — 'dominant castes' in my terminology. Any open expression of defiance will invite swift and severe punishment. But urban Mahars do not face the threat of imminent and barbaric violence from local toughs. Only those who live in villages know how suffocating and traumatic day-to-day life can be for those at the bottom of the ladder.

While urban Mahars have thrown out pictures and images of Hindu deities from their homes, rural Mahars have not discarded them but have only added those of the Buddha and Ambedkar. According to Neera Burra, Buddhism has hardly made any inroads into the spiritual life of rural Mahars.

Rural Mahars perform upper caste Hindu rituals in spite of Ambedkar's ban on such performance, but it is important to note that the performance is intended to express their protest against the caste system and Hinduism. Prior to 1950, attempts by rural Mahars to perform the rituals of upper caste Hindus could not have been even contemplated. But now the law is on the side of the SCs, or the Dalits, as the more self-conscious SCs prefer to call themselves. According to Neera Burra, the Mahars '. . . deliberately practised hitherto forbidden rites and rituals as a means of asserting their right to equality knowing full well that the caste Hindu could do nothing about it. There was a certain pride in this [assertion of]

equality.' And it is indeed ironic that 'As far as upper caste Hindus were concerned, conversion to Buddhism was not resented as much as attempts by Mahars to emulate their customs, ritual and dress.' All over rural India, poor Hindus from the very 'low' castes are resorting to what may be called Sanskritization, but such emulation nowadays is charged with protest. The form may be the same as before but the implications are different and this is understood both by the protestors and the objects of their protest. Neera Burra sums up the complex and somewhat confusing situation by stating that *'The Buddhist identity is important mainly for the outside world.* There is an attempt to emphasize one's distinctiveness and this is achieved by different methods. The inner core may remain Hindu but it does not reflect a betrayal of the [Buddhist] cause' (emphasis mine).

Our knowledge of caste has deepened and widened as a result of the dedicated research carried out by sociologists over the last 70 or 80 years. According to Professor Shah ('The Judicial and Sociological View of Other Backward Classes'), while the new knowledge has changed the sociologist's understanding of caste in significant ways, the Indian judiciary has chosen to ignore this knowledge.

Professor Shah has tried to point out how sociological research is relevant to judicial decision-making. For instance, contrary to popular belief during the colonial era that caste, unlike class, was totally rigid and impervious to change, mobility had become particularly characteristic of certain strategically placed groups even before the establishment of Pax Brittanica. Such mobility frequently occurred more for a small section of the caste, rather than the entire category. The consolidation of British rule put an end to some forms of mobility while creating new areas of mobility. The quantum of mobility increased considerably during the years of the Second World War and subsequently. From this point of view, the treatment of entire castes as backward seems unjustified as there is much intra-caste heterogeneity, especially among the numerically large castes. In fact right from the beginning of the twentieth century, castes or sections of castes, have changed their names and customs

and claimed a high status, rendering difficult, if not impossible, inter-census caste comparisons. Further, cognate sub-castes are coming together to form large caste categories in order to be better able to compete in the struggle for access to scarce resources.

Historically, mobile kin-groups tried to get absorbed into the locally prestigious castes, in particular, the dominant castes. For instance, in Coorg during the colonial period, kin-groups from the upwardly mobile but 'low' castes tried to pass off as the dominant caste of Coorg, the Coorgs. This kind of process was not peculiar to Coorg but a country-wide phenomenon. Further, in the hypergamous regions of the country, it was usual for men from the higher grades within a caste, or higher sub-castes, to recruit brides from lower grades or sub-castes. In a sense, the whole of India roughly to the north of the river Godavari is hypergamous, though particular groups (e.g., Anavil Brahmins and Patidars in Gujarat, Kulin Brahmins in Bengal, and Rajputs) were well known for practising hypergamy. Finally, Shah makes the point that caste in urban areas is different from caste in rural areas. In the former, hierarchy is replaced by 'divisiveness'. There is much internal differentiation in each urban caste, and the link with the caste's traditional occupation gets greatly weakened. The jajmani system is non-existent, ideas of purity and pollution are weakened and enclaved. In view of all this, Shah asks how caste in rural and urban areas can be treated as identical.

To go back to a few issues raised in Shah's paper: the increase in mobility in caste during this century, and especially since Independence, has meant that a breach has been effected in the linkage between caste and traditional occupation. And if the practice of traditional occupation is an indicator if not the cause of poverty and backwardness, then it follows that only those practising the caste occupation should be entitled to OBC status. This was indeed the point made by the late Professor I. P. Desai, a distinguished sociologist and a member of the Rane Commission in Gujarat, a Backward Classes Commission appointed by the Government of Gujarat, 1981. (Please see in this connection his article, 'Should Caste be made the Basis for Recognising Backwardness', and

Ghanashyam Shah's reply 'Caste, Class and Reservation', *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. XIX, No. 28, July 1984, pp. 1107-1116 and Vol. XX, No. 3, 1985, pp. 132-136).

Shah's other argument that urban caste is different from rural caste, and that hierarchy characteristic of rural caste is replaced by divisiveness in the urban counterpart, casts doubts on the suitability of using the same criteria of backwardness for both rural and urban castes. And if castes are to be treated as the 'units' of backwardness, even if one chooses to ignore the fact that the 'units' have become bigger and more heterogeneous in the last 60 or 70 years, how can castes which have a large number of representatives in state legislatures and ministries be treated as 'backward'? Especially when in the license-permit raj of independent India, access to political power holds the key to all manner of benefits.

In this context it is necessary to remember that the makers of the Constitution were concerned with 'efficiency', and laid down that for certain categories of jobs efficiency should be the sole criterion, as for instance, jobs in the armed forces, in the departments of science and technology, and in the higher levels of administration.

The Constitutional concern for 'job efficiency' needs to be highlighted, especially as the word 'merit' is viewed with cynicism in some circles, and as only providing a cloak for perpetuating upper class monopolies, in some others. The source of such cynicism is not far to seek. The quantum of mobility in society has increased considerably since Independence, and at the same time there is acute competition for the higher level posts in the government. But the examinations and tests favour those who have been educated in élite schools and colleges located in the bigger cities. And interviews for jobs are held in English. These factors favour the offspring of the middle classes and the rich, living in cities. Candidates from rural areas, from homes where English is not spoken as a matter of course, have reason to feel that these exams and tests are loaded against them. There is a crying need to examine critically the entire process of recruitment in such a way that candidates from rural areas, and homes where the parents are not educated, do not suffer in competition with those coming from

privileged backgrounds. (This also requires taking measures to cleanse higher education of corruption, casteism, nepotism and parochialism.) But the facts that I have listed above do not negate the existence of merit, and while efficiency is required in every job, it is crucial in positions requiring high technical knowledge, and a high sense of responsibility. Privatization and globalization further underscore the need for efficiency. The economic survival of this country depends on efficiency.

Professor Shah makes the point in his paper, 'Job Reservation and Efficiency', that ability and talent are not confined to particular groups but occur in every section of the population. The existing differences between hereditary groups can be explained largely on the basis of differences in the domestic environment, in the way children are socialized, in the kind of nutrition and health care they receive, and finally, the schools and colleges they are sent to. (This is not to ignore intra-group differences which, incidentally, are increasing rapidly.) Very large numbers of children in rural and urban India hail from homes where they are first generation literates.

India is, at the present moment, making use of the intelligence and talents of only a small percentage of its population. This is nationally harmful and constitutes a crime against the vast masses of people whose intellectual and moral resources remain undeveloped.

The Constitution wanted *all* children between the ages five and fourteen to be in school within a period of ten years from 1950. But this provision has been honoured only in the breach, and 48 per cent of the population of the country remains illiterate, according to the 1991 census. The percentage of illiterates in states such as Bihar, Rajasthan and UP is even higher. Female literacy in these states is abysmally low. It is worth reflecting that had the country achieved total literacy even by 1971, the quality of Indian democracy might have been different, and perhaps the percentage below the poverty line would have been much lower than the present one-third of the population.

A distinction needs to be made between, on the one hand, reservation in legislatures and on the other, reservation of

government jobs and seats in educational institutions. The first provides access to power, while education is essential for securing jobs, entry into various professions, and for improving the quality of life in general.

Reservation in legislatures has given access to power to the elected representatives of SCs (and STs) and this has enabled them to voice the needs and wants of a historically oppressed and exploited section of the population. Perhaps the symbolic importance of reservation is even greater than the actual results it has achieved in that the poor and the exploited have realized that a new era has dawned in which doors which had been shut for millennia have now been opened.

Article 346 of the Constitution of India provides for the appointment of a Commission to investigate the conditions of the 'socially and educationally backward classes', to identify such classes on the basis of objective criteria, and finally to recommend measures for their social and educational advancement. The first such Commission was appointed in 1953 with a respected Gandhian, Kaka Kalelkar, as its Chairman, and it submitted its report in March 1955. It listed 2,399 communities as 'backward', with 837 of them being classified as 'most backward'. It recommended reservation of jobs in the government and seats in educational institutions for the backward classes, but the report proved infructuous with several members submitting dissenting notes, and the Chairman himself writing a letter expressing his anguish at caste being made the criterion for determining backwardness. The failure of the first Backward Classes Commission probably only helped to fuel the frustrations of backward classes. In August 1961, the Government of India informed the state governments that while they (the state governments) had the discretion to apply their own criteria to determine backwardness, it was better to apply economic tests rather than go by caste, a position which, however, went against the general trend of judicial interpretation of the Constitutional provision regarding reservation for the 'socially and educationally backward classes'.

The issue of reservation for the backward classes (read 'castes') continued to be a thorny and emotive issue, and in 1977, when the Janata government came to power in Delhi, Morarji Desai appointed a Bihar leader, the late B. P. Mandal, to head a Commission to identify backward classes and make recommendations for their advancement. Mandal hailed from the backward caste of Yadavs (formerly known as Ahirs). Mandal submitted his report in 1980 but by that time Indira Gandhi had returned to power, and neither Indira Gandhi nor her successor, Rajiv, thought of implementing the Report. During the General Elections of 1989, the Janata Dal led by V. P. Singh included the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in its election manifesto. V. P. Singh became Prime Minister in January 1990 with the support of the BJP and the Left Front. In August 1990, Devi Lal, Deputy Prime Minister in the V. P. Singh cabinet, suddenly resigned from his post. He was a mercurial Jat from Haryana, credited with a large following among the Jats and the backward classes in the Hindi region. He announced that he would hold a Kisan rally in Delhi on 9 August. However, on 7 August, V. P. Singh pre-empted the OBC vote bank by announcing the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations, reserving 27 per cent of jobs in the Central Government for the backward classes. This caused a big stir in the Hindi region with many young men from the upper castes committing suicide by setting themselves on fire.

Radhakrishnan describes the 'method' used by the Mandal Commission ('Mandal Commission Report: A Sociological Critique') to arrive at the size of the population of 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs): 'Its estimate of the OBC is a hotch-potch, arrived at by subtracting from 100 the population percentages for SC, ST and non-Hindus (22.56 and 16.16 respectively) as per the 1971 census, and *the percentage for "forward Hindus" (17.58) as extrapolated from the incomplete 1931 census, and adding to this derived sum (43.7) about half the population for non-Hindus (8.4)*' (emphasis mine).

The Commission's list of OBCs incorporated the lists prepared

by the different states of India ignoring the fact that there was no uniformity in the criteria for preparing their lists, and that political considerations had played no small part in decisions to include or exclude. And West Bengal and Orissa had not prepared any lists of OBCs.

The Commission claimed the authority of that magic instrument, the computer, in preparing the lists. The data thus obtained was compressed into 31 tables and they were to be included in Volume V of the Report. But, according to Radhakrishnan, 'what passes for this volume is a single page (167) index of the serial numbers of 13 tables and their titles, based on the 31 tables.'

Any comment on the Commission's 'methodology' is superfluous. But thanks to its 'methodology' and the computer, 3,743 sub-castes among the Hindus alone were listed as backward. Thus the number of backwards had registered an impressive increase from 2,394 in 1955.

It is amusing to refer to the effect of V. P. Singh's decision on social scientists. Leftists to whom the word 'caste' had been anathema, and who had regarded any reference to it as a sign of the user's reactionary world-view, unrolled the red carpet to the decision to implement caste-based reservation. It was argued that reservation was essential for ushering in a 'secular revolution'. V. P. Singh was lauded as the new messiah of social justice. The adjective 'principled' became a prefix in all references to him in the Leftist press. Singh, human as he was, succumbed to the flattery. He went on to embrace the cause of other unfortunates — the minorities, women and youth. The former Raja of Manda became the Sant of Mandal. That very many others saw him as the greatest divisive force in independent India was the flip side of the coin.

While Radhakrishnan's essay provides a sociological critique of the Mandal Commission Report, Professor B. Sivaramayya, a legal scholar, has carefully analysed the judgement in 'The Mandal Judgement: A Brief Description and Critique'. The judgement declared that 27 per cent of jobs in the Central Government and its Public Sector Undertakings be reserved for 'Other Backward Classes,' that the total quantum of reservation not exceed 50 per

cent, and finally, that the 'creamy layers' in each backward caste be excluded from reservation. The judgement also struck down a government proposal for reserving 10 per cent of jobs for the very poor irrespective of caste, and another for extending reservation to promotions.

The Mandal judgement, instead of settling the issue of reservation, has fuelled attempts to bring in an Amendment to the Constitution to enhance the total quantum of reservation, and to extend reservation to groups and categories not covered previously. Indeed, the Congress government in Delhi took the initiative in this matter. It called an All-Party Conference on 28 April 1995 to bring in a wide-ranging amendment: 'It envisages amending the Constitution to protect reservation in promotions for SC and ST aspirants as well as providing quotas for promotions for those (sic) OBCs. It also provides for amending Article 16(4) of the Constitution to allow total reservation in excess of 50 per cent, so that OBC candidates may be adequately represented in Central Government Services. Furthermore, the same article will be amended to provide 10 per cent quota for economically backward sections of the upper castes . . . Again, OBC students will henceforth have 27 per cent of seats in Central educational institutions reserved for them' (*The Times of India*, 5 May 1995.)

On the above proposal of the Congress party and the decision to call an All-Party Conference to arrive at a consensus regarding reservations, *The Times of India* remarked in its editorial, 'With elections a year or so away, every political party is bound to indulge in populism of which a key element is reservations. The Congress has shown itself to be quicker off the mark than anyone else. It must be asked, however, whether there is not the danger of mortgaging the country's future for short-term electoral gain. *Reservations are not and cannot be, a major means of restructuring society. India will be reduced to a country of caste labels, of birth counting for more than achievement in education and in employment, of mediocrity getting ahead more rapidly than merit if the mania for reservations goes unchecked'* (*The Times of India*, 5 May 1995, emphasis mine).

It is understandable that judges, the interpreters of the Constitution, feel obliged to provide a rationale or an ideological basis for reserving seats in legislatures and jobs in the government for certain categories of citizens. Further, it is only just that groups which have historically been exploited and humiliated by powerful sections, be given some concessions with regard to access to scarce resources. But the use of the idea of 'reparations' in the Mandal judgement to justify reservations has potential for mischief. The idea may be used by communal groups for setting right historical wrongs.

Another justification mentioned is the need for 'empowering' the weaker sections. Reservation of jobs is considered necessary for the 'deprived backward communities to give them a share in the administrative apparatus and in the governance of the community'. Considering that the judgement was delivered in 1994, it is surprising that the empowering of women, a historically oppressed and exploited half of the society, did not form part of the agenda. It was an all-male bench.

The judiciary has interpreted 'socially and educationally backward classes' quite literally, excluding economic backwardness. In the Mandal judgement, the majority was of the view that the backwardness contemplated by Article 16(4) was 'social backwardness'. And, according to Sivaramayya, 'the leading judgement as well as the concurring judgements rejected economic criterion as the test of backwardness.'

According to J. Sawant, one of the members of the Mandal bench, 'Among the higher castes the economic backwardness is not due to their social backwardness. On the other hand among the lower castes their social backwardness is the cause of their educational and economic backwardness.' In the absence of any empirical evidence in support of this conclusion, one is forced to conclude that higher castes do not suffer by definition from social backwardness, and therefore all their ills, including poverty, are due to other factors, whereas in the case of the lower castes, all their ills, including poverty, are due to social backwardness. An excellent example of circular reasoning.

J. Sawant was forthright in his rejection of poverty alone as the test of backwardness: '. . . if poverty alone is made the test then the socially and educationally advanced sections will "capture" all posts in the reserved quota and . . . the socially and educationally backward classes would be left high and dry.' In other words, reservation is for 'socially and educationally backward classes,' and not for the poor from the 'advanced' classes. Hence the striking down of 10 per cent reservation for the poor, irrespective of caste. 'Socially and educationally backward classes' is thus equated with 'lower' castes.

The majority judgement supported further splitting the 'backward classes' into 'backward' and 'more backward', overruling a decision in the Balaji case where such a distinction was held invalid. According to Sivaramayya, 'The logic behind this view has been stated to be that if the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are lumped together with the OBCs, then the OBCs will take away all vacancies.' While this argument is sound, it overlooks the point that reservation for the SCs and STs enjoys a higher level of protection than that for the OBCs. But even more important, as pointed out earlier, there is much heterogeneity among the OBCs, which includes powerful land-owning, high status castes at one end, and numerically small, very poor castes which are just above the 'pollution' line, at the other. It is necessary to categorize the OBCs as more or most backward in order to protect the weaker groups.

The Mandal judgement upheld the exclusion of the 'creamy layers' among the backward classes from reservation stating that 'the concept of class denotes a number of persons having common traits: that if the connecting link in backward class is social backwardness then it should broadly be the same in a given class, that if some members are far too advanced, then the connecting link snaps and they can no longer be considered as belonging to the same group'. The Central Government has spelt out the broad criteria for identifying the creamy layers: 'They are the children whose parents are holding constitutional positions, Class I and Class II officers, Colonel and above in the defence services, families

owning irrigated land equal to or more than 85 per cent of the state land ceiling laws, and parents having a gross annual income of one lakh or more' (*The Times of India*, 1 August 1995).

It may be noted here that leaders of the backward classes everywhere have opposed the exclusion of the 'creamy layers'. Rallies have been held, and speeches made, expressing opposition to the exclusion. Further, state governments, under pressure from powerful backward class leaders, have moved very slowly or not at all in the matter of appointing commissions to identify 'creamy layers'. Very recently, the Kerala Legislative Assembly passed a bill providing for the derecognition of the 'creamy layers' and this move has provoked the Supreme Court to haul up the state government for contempt of court for not taking action on its direction of 16 November 1992. The governments of UP and Bihar have chosen a different path to defeat the Supreme Court's directive: they have redefined the 'creamy layers'. 'There is little doubt that the two governments had deliberately enlarged the existing criteria for deciding the creamy layer so as to preclude the exclusion of the influential IAS and IPS lobby from job reservation. The judges were scathing in their indictment of the move . . .' (editorial in *The Times of India*, 7 September 1995).

Sivaramayya's considered verdict on the Mandal judgement is that 'in rejecting the alternative modes of identification of OBCs like "occupation-cum-social-cum-educational-criteria", and in opting for caste test, the majority judgement buttressed caste not only among the Hindus but also among the Muslims and Christians.'

The Mandal judgement has even advocated a survey of castes for the entire population of the country, presumably to identify beyond doubt all the backward castes: 'What is unconstitutional with it, more so when caste, occupation and social backwardness is (sic) clearly intertwined in our society?' Sociologists may be pardoned for considering the view expressed in the Mandal judgement on the close nexus between caste, occupation and social backwardness, as somewhat out of date. Indian society in the 1990s is not the same as India in the 1930s or even the 1950s. There is an increasing disjunction between caste and traditional occupation and

this is true not only of the urban areas but also of the more prosperous villages. (This has come out in more than one essay in this volume.) Reservation for SCs and STs has not been without effect, and industrialization and urbanization since 1950 have benefitted vast numbers of people. It is only in the most backward parts of rural India that the nexus between caste, traditional occupation and backwardness is still close. (Even here, rapid population growth is resulting in people moving out of traditional occupations.) In the changing caste situation in rural and urban India, such a static view of caste is not in tune with facts on the ground.

Right from the beginning of the twentieth century British officials have used the term 'backward classes' to indicate low-status backward castes, and 'depressed classes' to mean the former 'untouchables' or Scheduled Castes (now Dalits). They do not seem to have been particular about the terms used, and such sloppiness — there is no other word for it — has continued in independent India. It is worth noting that terms such as 'Backward Classes' and 'Scheduled Castes' also serve as euphemisms for such unpleasant realities as 'low castes' and 'untouchables'.

The majority judgement, after stating that caste and class were used interchangeably in the pre-Independence years, proceeds to argue, '. . . the word "class" was the natural choice in the context of Article 16(4). First, non-Hindu religions did not recognize caste even though caste did exist even among these religions to a varying degree. Second, the Constitution is a document which is expected to endure for centuries.'

While the above statement recognizes that caste does exist among Muslims and Christians it prefers to defer to Islamic and Christian dogma, in order to defend the use of the word 'class'. But several Muslim leaders have been asking for reservation either for Muslims as a whole, or for the 'lower' castes among them, and the Christian Dalits have been demanding SC status from the Government of India. Why was this fact not taken into account? The other argument that the Constitution is a document expected to endure for centuries sounds comical when seen in the light of the fact that 75

amendments have been incorporated in the short space of 45 years. There is also a growing demand for a new look at the Constitution itself, and there is a section of influential opinion which would prefer the introduction of a presidential system in place of the present parliamentary system.

The majority judgement states, 'The word "class" in Article 16(4), in our opinion, is used in the sense of social class and not in the sense it is understood in Marxist jargon.' The ordinary reader is mystified at this uncalled for reference to 'Marxist jargon'. Class is used by all social scientists, and only a minority, and a declining one at that, are Marxists. That apart, 'class' and 'caste' are used as distinct if not opposed concepts in sociological literature. Class society is believed to be characterized by personal and familial mobility, where birth does not have the same lethal effects on the life chances of an individual as caste. Caste is believed to be extremely rigid, birth determining everything, and characterized by 'untouchability'. Religious ideas such as purity and impurity play a crucial role in caste as we saw earlier. The sociologist who has his ears to the ground knows that caste is changing, and that many of the beliefs about caste in sociology textbooks, particularly those written by non-Indians, are just Western stereotypes about Indian society. But our learned judges, going by the judgements they have delivered, have turned their backs on the social sciences. This is not conducive to the good of the society, delaying as it does the fulfilment of various Constitutional goals.

Any democracy should guarantee judicial independence, and every care should be taken to make sure that the judges get not only a high salary and other perquisites but are accorded a high status in the society. At the same time care should be taken to make certain that the guardians of the Constitution receive a training worthy of their calling. Social scientists, the media and indeed all enlightened people, should take a serious interest in the syllabuses designed for training lawyers. Above all, a familiarity with basic social sciences seems indispensable if judges are called upon to give their verdict on disputes involving complex social issues. But then it is a social scientist speaking!

Dr Zarina Bhatty's excellent essay on 'Social Stratification among Muslims in India' should, in addition to giving a concise account of their culture and institutions, dispel many myths about Indian Islam. Of course, she is writing about rural Muslims in Barabanki District in UP, but what she says about them is very broadly true of Muslims elsewhere.

Bhatty uses, successfully in my opinion, a caste framework to describe Muslim social stratification. Muslims in Kasauli village are divided into Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs, the former standing at the apex of the system and claiming descent from foreign immigrants while non-Ashrafs are the descendants of local converts from Hinduism. It is highly interesting to find that the degree of physical proximity to Ashrafs in the performance of traditional services has been a factor in determining mutual rank among non-Ashrafs.

Contrary to popular views, ideas of purity and pollution do play a part in the lives of Muslims. In particular, the degree of impurity associated with the performance of traditional occupation is yet another factor in the assignation of social rank. But the above statement needs to be qualified by adding that the pollution ideas of Muslims are not the same as those of upper caste Hindus. For instance, while collective or group pollution is transmitted by contact, personal pollution — as, for instance, that caused by copulation — is not so transmitted.

The non-Ashraf castes' tendency to emulate the customs, manners and lifestyle of the Ashrafs, Bhatty terms 'Sanskritization' in preference to 'Islamization', as she thinks that the process is very similar to that active among the lower status group Hindus. The parallel does not stop there: As with upper caste Hindus, the Ashrafs are busy discarding the customs which the non-Ashrafs are emulating.

However, emulation is not a simple process. It is emulation not only of the higher castes but also of the upper classes, the Ashrafs combining in themselves both the attributes. (Again, this is similar to the phenomenon among Hindus.) Emulation also — as among the lower castes, in particular the Dalits — contains a new element:

a protest against higher caste arrogance. This also ties in with the higher castes' discarding of the customs which are being taken over by the lower.

The fact that caste continues to characterize Indian Islam and Christianity means that the dogma of the equality of all members of each religion has not been strong enough to dissolve it. Perhaps this is more true where homogeneous groups (sub-castes) have been converted, than when individuals are converted. But the mass conversion of Mahars under the leadership of Ambedkar may be an exception: Not only was the conversion of Mahars an open protest against Hinduism but the converts were not required to take their place in a pre-existing Buddhist social order in India.

According to Tharamangalam ('Caste among Christians in India'), caste does exist among Christians but '. . . without any necessary linkage with the theological ideas of purity and pollution, or karma and dharma'. He states again that 'while all major characteristics of caste are present among Christians we have seen that the ritual aspects have been considerably weakened'.

I have no wish to contest Tharamangalam's conclusion about Christian caste being free from Hindu theological ideas, but as far as caste at the lived-in level is concerned, purity and pollution are far more crucial than karma and dharma, and this would be true of Hindus as well. But I have been told that ideas of purity and pollution exist among the Catholic converts in the Madurai region: I suggest that there is probably a regional or sectarian element with regard to the strength of purity and pollution ideas among different Christian sections in India.

Tharamangalam has stated that under the Portuguese archbishop, 'Syrians were allowed to continue practising untouchability.' It is also well-known that Dalit converts to Christianity have had to sit in pews set apart from the pews reserved for higher caste converts. No wonder that Dalit Christians are protesting against discrimination in the church just as Hindu Dalits are fighting against the Hindu establishment.

Tharamangalam makes the point that 'the retreat of caste in the context of modern, particularly urban life' may be more true among

educated Christians than among Hindus. While not contesting the truth of the above statement, I would say that other factors besides religion are involved here such as the city size, the kind of exposure which people have had in their school, college and profession, and finally, the historical factors operating in a region. Thus Bengalis and Gujaratis seem to be less caste conscious in their eating habits than South Indians. On the other hand, some trading and Brahmin groups all over India continue to be conservative in spite of long residence in cities. All these are very broad statements but the point I wish to make is that retreat from caste cannot be attributed to religious affiliation alone. Here I must hasten to add that Tharamangalam is not guilty of making such a simplification.

A most interesting point made by Tharamangalam about the ranking of castes being marked by ambiguity shows a striking similarity with caste-ranking among Hindus. From this Tharamangalam arrives at the important conclusion that 'Christian castes are part of an overall caste system [rather] than a separate Christian caste system'.

Another important conclusion reached by him is that 'the example of Syrian Christians shows that a relatively "Hinduized" group of Christians who eat beef and violate most of the pollution rules can still enjoy high caste status if they have economic and political power, and if the historical conditions are favourable'. What Tharamangalam states is true of the caste system as a whole, except for the beef-eating. Power, political and economic, has frequently managed to break through the ritual hierarchy enclaving and contextualizing the Brahmins' putative claim to the apex position. No doubt the Brahmin purohita, the chaplain, walks ahead of the Kshatriya ruler, and the Kshatriya allows him the luxury of the illusion that he, the priest, is higher. The Kshatriya needs the Brahmin for various purposes, including the conversion of his power into authority. He also wants the Brahmin to be pure, be physically close to the gods, command everyone's respect, so that all this can be used to buttress his own power and authority. And the Brahmin needs the Kshatriya-patron as much as the latter needs the former.

Finally, Tharamangalam omits to mention how Christians have internalized the idea of caste rank even though they live and operate largely in a Christian universe. Many Syrian Christians, Goan Catholics and others have told me how they were converted originally from Brahmins. A Carmelite nun in a Cochin college chastised me for my readiness to eat fish. She told me that her father was a Tanjore Brahmin who voluntarily became a Christian after reading the Bible, and she herself was a strict vegetarian. And finally some years ago, I happened to participate in a South Indian Bishops' Conference in Bangalore where matters of concern to the laity were discussed. And as I was about to leave the conference, one of the distinguished participants asked me, 'Professor, before you leave us will you please tell us how to get rid of caste among South Indian Christians?' Indeed, the conference had begun with that question!

CASTE AND WOMEN*

Leela Dube

This essay explores the relationship between caste and gender: it examines the way caste impinges on women's lives and explores the role of women in maintaining and, to some extent, changing caste. The exercise requires us to situate women as conscious acting subjects of social relationships and processes that constitute, reproduce and modify the social system characterized by the institution of caste.[1] Equally, we need to consider the determinate ways in which women are objectified and become instruments in — even as they introduce flexibility to — the structures and processes implicated in the reproduction of caste. The discussion focuses on three interrelated, indeed overlapping, themes — occupational continuity and the reproduction of caste, food and rituals, and finally, marriage and sexuality.

The three basic characteristics of caste, typified as jati, a birth-status group, are exclusion or separation (rules governing marriage and contact, which maintain distinctions of caste), hierarchy (the principle of order and rank according to status), and interdependence (the division of labour which is closely tied to hierarchy and separation).[2] These three analytically separable principles of the caste system operate not so much through individuals as through units based on kinship. The maintenance of rules of behaviour and actions

* I thank Saurabh Dube for discussion and editorial help. The list of references at the end of this paper includes certain entries which have not been cited in the text or notes but have gone into the making of its argument.

specific to one's jati and the patterns of interaction with other birth-status groups, for instance, critically centre on kinship units, particularly the family and the household. We find then that the punishment for transgression of rules and norms of caste leads to the ostracism of the domestic group of the offender unless s/he is disowned by the household.[3] Women's lives are largely lived within familial parameters. The centrality of the family and the household in their lives cannot therefore be overemphasized.

Similarly, when we turn to the material bases of caste, the most important form of inequality in the caste system, the unequal distribution of resources and exploitative relations of production, can be understood only through an enquiry into the principles of kinship governing allocation of resources, devolution of rights to property, rights to services, and entitlements. A jati or caste group then functions through its constituent familial units or large-scale kinship units. It is not the jati as a whole but the lineages or familial units which hold material resources. This has crucial implications for gender since within these units there are clear distinctions in respect of the rights and entitlements of their male and female members. Thus, if endogamy has the potential for raising one's family status through the forging of appropriate marital links, it can also initiate a tight squeeze by restricting marital choices and putting pressures for material resources for a daughter's wedding.

Occupational Continuity

Women's work contributes substantially to the occupational continuity of a caste group. It is, of course, true that the growth of new professions and open recruitment to occupations have been important aspects of social change in Indian society. The picture of inalienable unchanging links between traditional occupation and caste was, in any case, vastly overdrawn. At the same time, there are significant continuities in the link between caste and occupation. Agriculture — although now open to all castes — still gives a distinct identity to a large number of castes of 'traditional' cultivators.

Equally, some other occupations remain the exclusive privilege of particular castes. A Brahmin, for instance, still performs the functions of the purohit (priest), for upper and middle level castes. Among artisan castes of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, potters and weavers, a few members of the group at the very least are imparted the necessary skills, and make a living by the traditional craft. Finally, most ritually polluting occupations — the curing and tanning of hides, the removal of dead animals, scavenging, and the activities of the barber, the washerman, and the midwife — retain their association with specific castes.

In these occupations, closely tied to caste, the work of women, carried out as members of households — the basic units of production — is indispensable. It is difficult for weavers and potters to carry on the complex processes of their craft without the continuous help of the women and children of the household, who in turn have well-defined tasks. Women can also take on aspects of men's work: it is not unusual for women from a potter's family to establish contacts with clients and go to the market to assist with the selling of goods. Similarly, basket weaving is a joint activity of men and women. In horticulture, women often carry the major burden of work. In rural areas and small towns it is common for women from households of petty traders and shopkeepers to grind spices and prepare fries, fritters and preserves for sale in the family shop. Despite regional variations, these illustrations underscore the fact that occupational continuity in a large measure depends on women. It is telling that a man who runs away with another man's wife is censured for both 'breaking another man's cooking pot' and 'breaking a household'. The forsaken husband, after all, is left without help to carry out the business of living.

Jajmani relations, short term contractual affiliations between artisans and service castes and landowners, cultivators and traders, and relations of exchange among occupational castes, a feature of many rural and semi-urban areas, function once again at the level of the family. Both men and women render services and receive remuneration — in cash and kind — for their work. Among service castes such as barbers and washermen, women's work in relation to

the jajman's family is, indeed, well defined. To the north of the Vindhyas a barber woman renders personal services to the women of the jajman's family — or a family which engages the barber woman on cash payment — which include the cutting of nails, the decoration of feet (with special coloured solutions), a special oil massage and a bath for a new-born baby and its mother, the supplying of leaf cups and leaf plates for feasts, and the role of companion to the bride during the wedding ceremony. In Chhattisgarh, a Raot (grazier and water-carrier) woman has an important supportive role to play during feasts and ceremonies, bringing water, washing utensils, and grinding spices and soaked pulses for preparing fries and fritters. The castes of both the barber and the water-carrier help in preparing pakka food on ceremonial occasions. In the south, a washer-woman's ritual functions are indispensable for the washing of soiled clothes during the ceremony that goes with the first menstruation. In every region there are specific 'Untouchable' castes whose women work as midwives: these women, along with the men of their caste, share the essential task of removing pollution of upper and clean castes. Finally, in many parts of the country, the bond or contract which ties labourers to their masters is understood to include the services of both the husband and the wife.[4]

The cultural recognition of the significance of women's work in the continuity of caste-linked occupations is clear. At the same time, in order that women pursue these traditional occupations, they have to be trained in them from childhood and have to be socialized into accepting them as proper work which, within limits, is 'destiny'. It has been found that parents may restrict the education of girls to avoid a potentially uncomfortable situation in which the daughter develops a distaste for the traditional occupation of her caste. It then becomes difficult to get her married into an appropriate family. Not formal education, but the capacity and willingness to do traditional work tends to make a girl useful in the husband's family. The necessity of continuing with occupational work is an important basis for marrying within the caste. It is understandable then that a landowning cultivator family of the Kunbi caste in rural Maharashtra should be unhappy when one of its sons, after acquiring education,

decides to marry an educated Brahmin girl. What use would she be in an agriculturist's family? Would she be able to call her husband's home her own? Even home-based work linked to cultivation is seen as outside the arena of her experience and below her status.

In situations of change, women often have to take on the responsibility for continuing caste-based occupations and maintaining the household. When men give up their traditional occupation on account of its low ritual status or inadequate returns, the entire burden of occupational work often falls on the women. Many men migrate to towns leaving behind their families. Women continue their contribution in terms of services or craft, but for want of male help they face the choice of losing their clientele or coping with a doubled work burden. Middlemen intervene. Wives of migrant men often have to work under the authority of their husband's kin who surround them within the neighbourhood and locality. Thus, women's contribution to occupational continuity is carried out within patrilineal limits and under the impositions and controls of caste.

In a study of scavenger women conducted in Delhi, Karlekar (1976) found that while men were increasingly leaving the ritually 'defiling' occupation of their caste, women remained in the same traditional field. These women had to support the males of the household who were trying to acquire skills for entering new occupations, or explore independent sources of income. The men, even when unemployed, were loath to touch their traditional work. Boys were being sent to school while girls joined their mothers at work at an early age. Similarly, the Padyachi and Nadar families from Tamil Nadu who come to Delhi in search of employment have their women take up work as domestic helps in private homes for washing clothes and utensils, and cleaning the house. It is held that in difficult times women, since they are used to doing domestic work for their own household, can do similar kind of work for others. The men, on the other hand, generally consider it below their dignity to do such jobs. In the absence of regular employment, even odd jobs are preferred to domestic work. Among these migrant groups women are often the principal supporters of the family: women's experience of multi-faceted housework becomes the basis for maintaining the household.

The controls are retained. Social and ritual matters are discussed and decided upon by the males of the caste within the neighbourhood.

Food and Rituals

A jati or caste has a distinctive culture, a certain commonality that imparts a sense of identity to its members. These cultural practices in turn are learnt largely within the family and kinship networks. Modes of worship, fasts and festivals, rules governing concerns of purity and pollution, and the organization of space, constitute interrelated and intermeshed elements which impart commonality and identity to members of a caste. While some of these features are shared by other castes in the same region or caste groups of the same varna category across regions, it is, in fact, the specific configuration of these elements and features within a particular caste that serves as its mark of distinction. Practices relating to food form an important mediating relational idiom within this matrix.

Food constitutes a critical element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. Its centrality extends to both the attributional and transactional dimensions of caste. In other words, both the exclusiveness of castes as bounded entities and inter-caste relationships are articulated by the idiom of food. Women, key players in the process of socialization, are also the principal protagonists in this arena. The task of safeguarding food, averting danger, and in a broad sense attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food, falls upon women. There is relaxation in the public arena but home is still the custody of women.

The concerns of purity and pollution centring on food begin at home. The principles of caste involve a clear distinction between the domestic space/home and the 'outside' world. Women play the key role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of the home. Notions of safety relating to both purity/pollution and the 'evil eye' entail a variety of restrictions and constraints on women in the tasks of processing, preserving, cooking and distributing food. These injunctions pertain to specific observances relating to the maintenance

of the required level of purity of the body, the division of space for practices of cooking and consumption of food and the preservation of traditions in regard to caste-linked prescriptions and proscriptions about different foods.[5] Foods are hierarchically classified in terms of intrinsic purity and impurity, vulnerability and resistance to pollution, and in terms of specific characteristics they embody — passion, anger, calm, strength, spirituality. Foods then are substances which carry the capacity to affect and transform the person who consumes them. The responsibility for who eats what, where and when, falls upon women within the domestic space. Women's practices in relation to food play a critical role in the hierarchical ordering of castes.

If food and its attendant relations of commensality are a critical element in the ranking of castes, the behaviour of men and women in this arena also present divergences and contrasts. Women tend to be more circumscribed in taking proscribed foods or accepting food from other castes. Anthropologists, for instance, have often pointed out that women are more particular about commensal restrictions. In situations away from home and their locality, men tend to be more relaxed about rules of commensality; in a similar context women are both chaperoned and watched over carefully and are expected to follow these rules more strictly. Men have the excuse that they have to move about with all kinds of people. Women, of course, are not permitted such freedom. Moreover, the prescriptions and prohibitions regarding food for women are governed by principles of kinship, marriage and sexuality. Upper caste women who are meant to believe in the indissolubility of marriage, for instance, are expected to change their lifestyle drastically after they are widowed. They are required to observe strict rules of purity and pollution while preparing food, to give up the consumption of foods which are tamasik — which raise passion and desire — and to forego a 'proper' meal in the evenings.[6] Women's practices concerning the consumption of food in terms of its intrinsic qualities as well as regulations of place and time are important determinants of the ritual status of their caste. Equally, these rules are governed by the need to regulate interaction with the outside world, particularly other castes and communities.

The control over food is, at once, the protection of women from the transgression of sexual norms and a safeguard against a breach of the boundaries of caste.

Along with food, domestic rituals — the daily care of family deities and the propitiation of ancestors — are a major responsibility of women.[7] In many families women do not actually perform the puja of the family deity; they nonetheless, make arrangements for its performance and prepare prasad. Where men are busy in professional work and the rules more relaxed, women can perform the daily puja. At the same time, on special days of worship, either a male in the family or a Brahmin priest performs the puja. And then there are special pujas and fasts to be undertaken for the welfare of the husband and children and for the prosperity of the family. These rituals, worships, fasts and feasts are, in their detail, a part of the tradition of a caste. The key place of women in this arena along with limitations imposed on them simultaneously underscore their subordinate place in relation to the men within the family.

At the same time, the place of women as active agents and instructors in the arena of food and rituals also implies that women who command its repertoire of rules gain special respect that gives them a certain self-identity and self-esteem. For most women these practices are an important avenue of self-expression and social recognition. They also act as a medium which helps women exercise power over other women and men within the family. Thus, the nurture of self-esteem and self-assertion on the part of individual women is inextricably tied to the maintenance of family prestige. Responsibility for the preservation of traditions, maintenance of the sanctity of bounded space, control over rituals, the distribution of food and the task of socialization give women a sense of power over people and situations. The processes within which women carve out a living space also reinforce caste and its boundaries.

Food is an important element in the social acceptability of inter-caste unions. Acceptance of food cooked by a woman married into a family of another caste involves complex judgements regarding the differences in the ritual quality of foods in terms of their purity and vulnerability to pollution. Thus, depending upon the caste status

of a woman, she may be prevented from entering the innermost cooking arena and allowed to prepare and serve only pakka food or snacks. Similarly, specific occasions — everyday cooking versus cooking on special occasions and rituals such as puja of the family deity, or shraddha of the ancestors — also entail boundaries. Significantly, a woman who belongs to a caste lower than that of her husband's can often cook ordinary food for the family but is not allowed to cook for the ancestors. Caste endogamy, which, as we shall see, is relevant for the placement of the offspring, also entails that a woman coming from another caste cannot be fully incorporated into the husband's group and acquire the privilege of feeding the ancestors.

Marriage and Sexuality

This brings us to the key area of marriage and sexuality. The caste system is premised upon the cultural perception of a fundamental difference in male and female sexuality. First, periodical pollution through menstruation and parturition renders women intrinsically less pure than men. There is, within a caste, a hierarchy between the sexes. At the same time, the difference in the levels of purity/impurity between men and women is much less among the lower castes than among the high castes. Low caste women, apart from self-pollution, also deal with others' pollution through occupational activities such as midwifery, disposal of dirt, the washing of dirty clothes and many other services. But their men, too, have to undertake polluting craftwork and service for others. Among these castes women's substantial contribution to the process of earning a livelihood along with the sharing of impure tasks by both men and women makes the gender division less unequal. It is, of course, true that among these castes menstrual pollution does impose certain disabilities on women in respect of food, worship of deities and ancestors. At the same time, Brahmin and other higher caste men neither incur self-pollution of the kind their women do nor do they have to perform polluting work for other castes. Their women, on the contrary, are involved in

pollution incurred through bodily processes, mainly menstruation and childbirth. They are also responsible for doing some of the polluting tasks within the family, although this, perhaps, does not render them permanently less pure than men. There is a pervasive notion that women never attain the level of purity of men of their own caste. It is well known that traditionally women of twice-born castes have been equated with Shudras who could not be initiated into the learning of the Vedas.

The other source of impurity for women is widowhood. Widows are not supposed to perform the puja of family deities; they do not cook the pure food offered to these deities. A man, on the other hand, is not similarly affected if he becomes a widower. Such hierarchy between the sexes is more a feature of Brahmin and other 'clean' castes. While some of the disabilities imposed on widows are prevalent among all castes, it can be argued that concerns of purity/impurity along the gender divide have an inverse relationship with the ritual status of castes.

Moreover, the cultural schemes which underlie the caste system are based upon a fundamental difference between male and female bodies in respect of their vulnerability to incur impurity through sexual intercourse. Sexual involvement is a much more serious matter for a woman since the act affects her internally while it affects a man only externally. In the case of inter-caste sexual relations a man incurs external pollution which can be washed off easily but a woman incurs internal pollution which pollutes her permanently. The contrast is expressed culturally by likening a woman to an earthen pot which is easily and permanently defiled if used by a polluted person within the caste or by a lower caste person or one of a different religion, and a man, on the other hand, to a brass pot which is not easily polluted and, in any case, can be restored to its original state by scrubbing, washing, and if necessary, by putting it through fire, a purifier par excellence. This metaphor — which distinguishes between men and women in terms of their respective vulnerability to pollution through sexual intercourse — is used extensively in caste and village councils when cases of sexual entanglements come up for adjudication. Indeed, it dwells in popular

consciousness while judging men and women. It should be clear that upper caste women are much more vulnerable to permanent pollution than lower caste women. Indeed, sexual transgressions within the caste are treated much more leniently, particularly among those castes which allow secondary unions. Equally, it is entanglements with men of castes lower than that of the woman which are taken very seriously. Pollution incurred through food affects both women and men internally, but pollution incurred through sexual intercourse is radically different in character for the two sexes. This is closely linked to the dictum that sanctions hypergamy although within well-defined limits: 'Superior seed can fall on an inferior field but inferior seed cannot fall on a superior field.'

This brings us to the most crucial attribute in the cultural perception of differences between the sexuality of men and women. The other differences are, in fact, orchestrated by the culturally coded master difference between male and female bodies in respect of procreation. In contrast to the tenuous and fleeting role of man in the process of procreation, a woman's role is long drawn and entails an involvement which is beyond extrication. In the case of an unattached woman, pregnancy is a disaster not just because in patrilineal society paternity is essential for group placement but also because the issues of caste boundaries and her own purity are involved. The number of orphanages and abandoned children in our country are proof of the effects of a combination of patriliny and caste. Sexual asymmetry is critically implicated in the twin principles of separation and hierarchy that characterize the caste system.

Marriage and sexual relations constitute a central arena in which caste impinges on women's lives. In the caste system membership of discrete and distinct groups is defined exclusively and unalterably by birth — this principle underlies the existence of castes as bounded groups. This characteristic entails a pervasive concern with boundary maintenance. Although in most of Hindu India, recruitment by birth follows the principle of patrilineal descent and thus the father's identity is essential for group placement, in the attribution of caste status to the child, the caste of the mother is not exactly irrelevant, and has to be taken into consideration. Irrespective of the descent

system, caste, in fact, functions as a principle of bilateral affiliation.[8]

The extent to which caste functions as a principle of bilateral affiliation varies across regions and castes. By and large we can say that smaller marriage circles with an emphasis on the purity of caste and a preference for intra-kin marriages attach a greater value to the bilateral principle of caste affiliation. This applies principally to South India where intra-kin marriages over generations have, traditionally, made for narrow connubial circles. Even today intra-kin marriages have not lost their value although the proportion has decreased. However, even in contexts which underplay the bilateral principle of caste affiliation, a woman's role in biological reproduction, as we shall see, makes her primarily responsible for maintaining the purity of caste and its boundaries and calls for proper control over her sexuality.

The cultural apprehension of the vulnerability of women and the emphasis on their purity and restrained behaviour which entail limited interaction with the opposite sex, are important components of management of female sexuality in a caste society. The emphasis on arranged or negotiated marriages and the proper organization of space and time for young girls after puberty derive their justification from this concern with boundary maintenance, which means the maintenance of the ritual purity of caste. All these are implicated in the mechanisms and processes of socialization and in the opportunities for education and employment open to women. Caste thus imparts a special character to the process of growing up as a female. All this does not end with marriage. Women need to be controlled, their sexuality contained, at all times. This is sought to be achieved through mechanisms of proper social control, idealization of familial roles, and an emphasis on female modesty. The importance of the purity of caste affects a woman in all life-stages.

The beliefs and practices which negotiate and contain the threat posed by female sexuality are not uniform across the caste hierarchy and are also marked by regional variations. At the same time, there does exist a shared ideological framework that informs this arena. This framework rests upon a clear demarcation of phases of life

with respect to female sexuality — a special ritual value accorded to virginity, the ritualization of puberty and special care accorded to pubescent girls, a glorification of the married state and motherhood, and, a clear distinction between primary and secondary marriage — which in turn constitute the institutionalized mechanisms for the containment of female sexuality.

The value attached to virginity is directly linked to the concern with female purity. The pre-pubertal phase is looked upon as a stage of intrinsic purity and is celebrated in a number of ways. The custom of worshipping and feeding virgin girls on specific days such as the eighth day of Navaratri is widespread in India. Equally, pre-pubertal girls are given special recognition in life cycle rituals. A pre-pubertal girl is looked upon as a manifestation of Devi or the Mother Goddess and is believed to drive away the lurking presence of an evil spirit and an evil eye. The purity and the consequent privileged status of a girl in the pre-pubertal stage contrasts sharply with, and brings into clear relief, the next phase, the onset of puberty.

In South India, this change in a girl's status is dramatized through rituals. The rituals and special prescriptions of diet vary across castes. The core, and the underlying message, does not change. Similarly, in Orissa and Maharashtra, several castes observe the essential features of puberty rituals although they conduct them on a modest scale. The message of these rituals is clear. The girl has become a sexual being: this calls for restrained behaviour on her part and emphasizes the need for protection and vigilance. The occasion is at once auspicious and calls for a guard against the evil eye. The regulations regarding diet and movement are directed towards future fertility: they make the process of childbearing smooth and control the girl's sexuality. Restrained and controlled sexuality is a pre-requisite for socially sanctioned motherhood. The puberty ceremony informs the people within the kin-group and the jati that the girl has come of age and her marriage is open to negotiation. The mechanisms which set limits and restraints also sacralize and sanctify sexuality. In the rest of India the first menstruation is not marked by any rituals. The event is taken care of more or less unobtrusively. At the same time, restrictions relating to pollution, food, and behaviour do come

into play. The onset of puberty then is a definite departure in the life of a girl. She becomes conscious of her fragile purity.

It is, in fact, this preoccupation with female purity and its fragility that helps explain certain aspects of marriage in caste society. In traditional terms it is the marriage of a virgin with full rites within the acceptable limits of connubiality which sacralizes and sanctifies the girl's sexuality.[9] It makes her a full member of her caste, and thus a complete person. In North and Central India the matrix of an early marriage of a girl, a long waiting period when she continues to stay in her natal home, and gauna or mukhlawa, the ritual of sending off the girl to her husband's house after puberty, is very common. If the family is not in a position to bear the double expenditure, the two ceremonies may be collapsed into one: the girl is formally sent to her husband's home for two or three days after marriage and is then brought back only to be sent after the onset of puberty.[10] Similarly, the objective of early marriage, namely, to preserve the virginity and purity of the girl until marriage, becomes clear if we look at Rajasthan where in some areas a number of baby brides are formally married to baby grooms in a specially held marriage fair on an auspicious day. It is also customary to marry off all the girls in a family from the age of two to thirteen or fifteen together on a special auspicious day.[11] The logic of an early marriage is clear: such child marriages ensure that a girl is married with full rites while still a virgin, and consummation of marriage can wait until she has come of age. It is significant that while castes and families who can afford to keep their girls secluded and protected tend to marry them off after puberty, other castes who require that their daughters work in the fields or away from home prefer to marry them before puberty. In a village in Sikar district in Rajasthan, where the normal age of marriage of girls ranged between seven to sixteen years, most post-pubertal marriages were among the Charans and Brahmins whose daughters did not work outside the home and could be segregated and secluded (Palriwala 1991). In Uttar Pradesh, once again, the poorer castes whose women and children have to work outside, away from home and without protection, find safety in pre-pubertal marriage (Kumud Sharma, personal communication). It is

in the context of this valorization of virginity that we need to locate the critical cultural distinction between primary marriage and secondary unions.

A primary marriage connotes the marriage with full rites of a virgin with a man from an appropriate caste group. A woman goes through such a marriage only once in her life. Her subsequent unions may have social sanction and she may continue to use all the signs of the married state but she has permanently stepped outside the bounds of a primary marriage. These unions are not solemnized through full-blown rituals but socially declared through a symbolic act or a truncated ceremony — which could include the presentation of glass bangles or a nose ring to the woman which signifies married status, the exchange of garlands, and the throwing of a white cloth coloured at the corners over the woman's head symbolic of the fact that the woman is now protected by a man. It follows that the terms used for remarriage often refer to these acts: *churi pahanana* or the giving of glass bangles, *chadar dalna* or the throwing of a sheet over the woman's head, *nath pahanana* or the giving of a nose ring. Alternatively, remarriage can be designated as 'coming to live in the man's house' or 'sitting' (*paithu/baithna*), 'getting a woman in the house' (*ghar me bithana*), or 'keeping a woman' in the house (*kari* or *karewa*). For a man, on the other hand, there are no restrictions on the number of times he can marry with full rites as long as the bride has not married before. Only if he marries a woman who has been already married in the past does he have to forego a marriage with full rites.

Only a properly married woman can rightfully enter secondary, socially approved, unions. This consideration extends to inter-caste secondary unions also. Traditionally, a woman cannot enter a socially approved union without the sacralization of her sexuality through a full ritual wedding conducted according to the customs of the caste. The distinction between primary and secondary marriage, once again, centres on the concern with female purity and the management of female sexuality. It is sought to be sustained by according a special value to primary marriage and a low status to a secondary union. Secondary unions are considered a concession to human weakness:

a woman's need to satisfy sexual desire, without seriously undermining the boundaries of caste. The castes which permit remarriage, unlike Brahmin and other high castes, do not look upon the first marriage as indissoluble or inviolable. At the same time, it is the first marriage which has a sacramental character and is a samskara that cannot be repeated.[12] Importantly, the traditional absence of remarriage of widows and divorcees among a caste is an indicator of its high ritual status. Sexual asymmetry is inextricably bound up with the maintenance of the boundaries and hierarchies of caste.[13]

The principles of sexual asymmetry underlie the relationship between caste endogamy and dowry, the different fates of men and women in inter-caste unions, and the sexual abuse of women. We saw that caste purity is maintained through endogamy. Marriages are effected predominantly within a jati or a jati cluster. Srinivas (1976:90) has pointed out that in contemporary caste society cognate jatis tend to get telescoped to form a single entity for purposes of marriage. Similarly, while caste associations with political ends comprise a number of endogamous jati in a caste or varna category, specific connubial boundaries are sought to be maintained. Matrimonial columns in newspapers and magazines clearly indicate that marital boundaries have been relaxed only very narrowly. In these columns there are few entries which do not mention a prospective bride's/groom's caste (specific endogamous group, regional caste cluster, or in a few cases, varna). Even those who specify 'caste no bar' tend to mention their own caste, perhaps for those respondents who may be prepared to ignore caste but only up to a limited extent. A matrimonial relationship with a much lower caste seems out of the question.[14] The compulsion to marry within a well-defined caste group in a patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system is closely tied to the practice of dowry.[15]

Caste both imposes constraints and creates the dominant ethos which underlies the practice of dowry within Hindu society. The increasing social and economic differentiation within an endogamous unit, traditional or currently acceptable, in terms of ownership of resources, income and professions has led to severe competition

among parents of marriageable daughters. This has resulted in higher demands and expectations on the part of the groom's family. In a consumerist ethos, dowry becomes the easiest way of improving a family's lifestyle, and a source of ready cash. Middle class families are the worst sufferers in the marriage market. They have limited means but cannot think of violating the norms regarding marriage within the appropriate group. The pressures of endogamy compel them to stick to arranged marriages and trap them in negotiations with a premium on dowry. Moreover, in a social context defined by notions of male superiority where the right of first choice lies with the man and his family, the path of a negotiated marriage is replete with possibilities of the humiliation of young women. Finally, the principle of endogamy and the attendant concern with the maintenance of boundaries of caste impose restraints on young women. A daughter's reputation is predicated upon the constraints which bind her movements. What is at issue is not only the fear and the horror of premarital sex; opportunities to meet and associate with young unmarried men, most parents worry, may lead their daughter to choose her own partner.[16] And what if he is from a lower caste? Dowry cannot be reduced to endogamy; but its escalation within Hindu caste society cannot be understood without reference to it.

The principle of endogamy is, of course, subverted by sexual unions across castes. The boundaries of caste are breached, the norms transgressed. Male protagonists and female players have different fates.

We had noted the distinction between primary and secondary marriage. Secondary unions across caste are formed by individuals on their own initiative and are then taken cognizance of by the community. Among castes whose women can customarily enter into secondary unions, inter-caste unions receive a certain measure of acceptance if the man and the woman belong to castes of more or less equal status or the man belongs to a caste higher than that of the woman. The offence has to be expiated through the payment of a fine and the giving of a feast. The man is ostracized — if at all — temporarily and this becomes evident only on formal ritual and

ceremonial occasions. In North and Central India the offspring of such unions are incorporated in the father's caste: his 'seed', even in an inter-caste secondary union, turns the children into members of a well-defined caste group. The temporary stigma borne by the children is not of much consequence. On the contrary the woman involved in such unions loses her caste; she is disowned by her family and kin-group. In some places this rejection is ritualized. In south-eastern Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the husband gives a mortuary feast (known as *marati-jeeti bhat*) announcing the symbolic death of his wife who has gone out of the caste. At the same time, the woman is never fully incorporated into her new husband's caste. She cannot participate as a full member in rituals or on ceremonial occasions including community feasts. Equally, a woman who has lost her caste has to depend on the man with whom she has lived for the disposal of her dead body. If the man is dead and there are no sons, her corpse is carried away by members of the lowest caste and buried without rituals. In South India the offspring of inter-caste unions are said to be assigned a status inferior to the children born of primary unions. The children bear the mother's stigma. In fact, the progeny born of the remarriage of widows and divorcees within the caste are also assigned inferior status, which is, however, higher than that of children of inter-caste unions. The gradations among children rest upon the caste and the marital status of the mother.[17]

A strong patrilineal ideology in which male blood is the real determining element in the placement of offspring — unless the mother is of a fairly low caste — is more characteristic of North than of South India. In the case of the Jats of Haryana, who represent an extreme case, even the ritual distance between castes was not of much significance. The relative freedom from Brahminical injunctions and the weak hold of norms of ritual purity and pollution meant that during the colonial period Jat men freely entered into sexual unions with women belonging to very low castes such as the Chamar and the Chuhra (scavenger). The children born of these women were absorbed into the Jat community. In Jat self-perception their community is like the sea: whatever falls into it becomes Jat (Prem Chowdhry 1994).[18]

The Rajputs or Kshatriyas, once again, have been open to hypergamous unions with women of different castes, often much below them in status. The ruling classes used their privileged status to ritually sanction their marriages with virgin girls of different clean castes. The offspring born of such unions adopted the father's identity; they were known as Rajputs, but had a lower status than their father. Women of secondary unions, of course, were and are looked upon as concubines.

Men of dominant castes, including Rajputs, also have mistresses from different castes. The ritual status of these men is not questioned as long as they do not establish a household and eat food cooked by their mistresses. It is only if there is an open and long term liaison with a very low caste woman that these men run the risk of being ostracized. The power and privilege of their family can serve to cover their indiscretion. Moreover, it is always possible for men to return to the caste fold through prayaschitta (atonement) for what they have done.

Men have institutionalized mechanisms to escape the incurrence of pollution through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman. This often takes the form of a purificatory bath and the ritual expiation of the offence. Orthodox Brahmins in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, for instance, after sleeping with a low caste woman discard the old sacred thread, have a purificatory bath and don a new sacred thread. On the other hand, if a woman from these communities goes 'astray' and the matter becomes public knowledge she is banished, declared dead to the family and a 'mock' shraddha (funeral rites) is performed for her. The fate of the paramour of a high caste woman, if he belongs to a low caste, is severe punishment at the hands of the holders of power — Jats, Rajputs, Brahmins, Kammas — loss of sources of livelihood, a good beating, and sometimes, even death.[19]

Dominance predicated upon ownership of resources is intertwined with notions of the ritual status of different castes and the associated idea of graded qualities of blood. Low caste women are sexually exploited by powerful upper caste men owning land. It is not only difficult for low caste men to protect their women against the lust and desire of their upper caste masters and superordinates in the

agrarian hierarchy, but there is also a tacit acceptance of upper caste 'seed'. Only if an upper or middle level caste man is excommunicated by his own community for having a sustained relationship with a low caste woman is he identified with her caste; their children grow up in the mother's caste. But things do not often come to such a pass. Fleeting liaisons and acts of sexual aggression by upper caste men are much more familiar. The low caste opposition to these — and other upper caste practices — results in sexual assaults on their women which attack the dignity and honour of the male kin and the community. Rape, as elsewhere, is an act of power through sexual violence. The assertion of dominance is claimed as a right by upper castes. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, it is said that just as a she-goat may be milked at any time at one's own will, so can a Chamar woman be enjoyed any time at one's discretion. In Vidarbha, Kunbi landowners who are on the lookout for Mahar women working in their fields say with contempt, 'Give her a few measures of grain and she will be quiet.' The control of resources and ritual status — together integrally informed by and constitutive of relations of power — reinforce each other and underlie the sexual exploitation of lower caste women by upper caste men.

Conclusion

I will, in conclusion, briefly consider whether apparently inexorable and inevitable processes of change, invoked by myopic mouthpieces of modernization, have led to transformations in the relationship between caste and gender. There has certainly been a considerable loosening of the rules and norms governing commensality and a weakening of the attendant mechanisms of ostracism and excommunication: but the relational idiom of food and the play of rituals, articulated by the mutual intermeshing of caste and gender, continues to be critical for the functioning of families. Similarly, transformation in the nature and magnitude of social interaction characterized by the near-absence of commensal inhibitions, particularly in metropolitan and urban areas, the enactment of state

laws which recognize inter-caste marriages, divorce and widow remarriage within the framework of the Hindu legal system, and a greater familiarity with the institution of civil marriage, have opened up possibilities of marriages outside the bounds of caste. At the same time, negotiated and arranged marriages within the recognized limits of connubiality are the dominant and overwhelming norm. Finally, the increased emphasis on caste identities in the wider context of institutionalized politics centring on the policies and practices of the state, has led to the reworking, refurbishment and reinforcement of 'caste traditions'. Caste is not dead. Gender is a live issue. The principles of caste inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society; the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are articulated by gender.

Notes

1. Caste is one of the basic institutions of Hindu society and has engaged the attention of scholars, activists and politicians. There is voluminous literature on the nature and character of caste in its various aspects. Its ideal typical structure with regional variations and the processes of change and continuity have been vividly described and cogently analysed. Scholars have tried to explore the fundamental principles that underlie the caste system, and the study of caste has given rise to endless controversies and debates. At the same time, the significance of gender in understanding the caste system and the way caste impinges on women's lives, although not totally ignored, have not received the attention they deserve.
2. The norms governed by the basic characteristics of caste have undergone dilution during the last few decades but they have not disappeared and still remain the typical identifying marks of Hindu society. When I refer to caste as jati, it is typically a birth-status group governed by the principles of exclusion and hierarchy. The characteristic of interdependence between different castes through patron-client relations, providing services and goods and receiving means of subsistence in return, has weakened considerably but is still visible in different forms.
3. It is, of course, true that economic and political power has played an important part in the easy atonement or non-cognizance of offences, but here too, more often than not, this play has been essentially that of a familial unit to which the individual belongs.

4. Women resent such arrangements. Breman (1974) reports that among the Dubla who worked as bonded labourers for Anavil Brahmins in South Gujarat, girls did not wish to marry a bonded labourer for the fear of getting bound to the master's household and being required to do all kinds of jobs at the beck and call of the master's family.
5. In this context, it is important to set out certain key categories and practices which inform and govern the relational idiom of food. An important distinction at work in North and Central India, is between pakka and kachcha food. Pakka food is boiled in milk or fried in clarified butter, which, along with fruits are pure substances and not significantly vulnerable to pollution. On the other hand, kachcha is essentially everyday food: rice, lentils and other cereals boiled in water are kachcha and highly vulnerable to pollution; they need to be cooked, served and preserved under rigorous conditions of purity. A similar, more rigorous, distinction — though not categorized in terms of the kachcha and pakka dichotomy — is at work in southern India as well. The key notion here is of what is referred to in Tamil as *patthu* food. Broadly, food cooked or steamed in water such as idli, lentils and, particularly, rice is *patthu*; as a corollary, contact with this food also makes one's hand *patthu*. The cooking, serving and distribution of this food requires conditions of a high level of purity, as indeed does the main meal offered by Brahmins and certain high castes to family deities and ancestors. *Madi* or *solu* or *sola* — in Tamil, Marathi and Hindi, respectively — refer to the practices of maintaining purity and avoidance of pollution. These practices may differ in detail and rigour but are informed by the same ideal (see Srinivas 1962, Khare 1976). Similarly, the notions of *enjalu* (Telugu), *aechal* (Tamil), *ushtu* (Marathi) and *jutha* (Hindi) — food that has been contaminated and polluted by coming into contact with spittle or the mouth — are widespread. Indeed, requirements of maintaining certain levels of purity of the body and of space and recognition of the pollution associated with women's bodily processes are prevalent to different degrees at all levels in the caste hierarchy. Women's behaviour with respect to food has great relevance to the hierarchical ordering of castes.
6. Onions and garlic along with strong condiments are believed to enhance sexual desire; non-vegetarian food has a similar effect and also nurtures anger. The flesh of animals and birds who live on refuse — for instance, domestic fowl — is traditionally forbidden to many castes who do eat fish and certain other kinds of meat; pork is eaten only by a few low castes; and carrion is consumed by groups at the absolute bottom of the caste hierarchy.
7. During the last few decades there has been considerable standardization of rituals and calendrical festivals. Temples have become a common venue for the celebration of life-crisis rituals. Commercially-run organizations facilitate their performance. At the same time, standardization has not wiped out caste traditions. Many of the festivals, vratas and special pujas are associated

with particular castes. In an annual shraddha of the father in an Iyer Brahmin's family, for instance, offerings are specified and food has to be cooked by the son's wife in a pure state. Special vratas and pujas associated with the auspicious married state, the honouring of pre-pubertal girls, and puberty rituals, also have caste-specific observances.

8. Even among a matrilineal caste group like the Nayar of Central Kerala where group placement was through the mother, the identification of paternity was essential to ensure that the woman had mated only with man/men from an appropriate caste or sub-caste, i.e. either from a superior group or from a group of roughly equal status and not from an inferior status caste group (See Gough 1959; Dube 1988c).
9. The significance of virginity in fulfilling the basic requirements of a first marriage and its centrality in the complex of rites which sacralize and sanctify female sexuality becomes clear if we look at the custom of pre-pubertal mock marriage prevalent among many castes in Chhattisgarh, south-eastern Madhya Pradesh, until a few decades ago. It is comparable to *ihi* (pre-pubertal marriage to bel-fruit) among the Newar of Nepal (Allen 1982) and a *tali*-tying ceremony among the matrilineal Nayar which was a living custom until the early part of this century (Gough 1955). In a token marriage in Chhattisgarh described by Dube (1953) a girl was married to a wooden pounder used for husking paddy before she attained puberty. Girls were actually married after puberty but a mock marriage before puberty was of the essence. 'Any sexual act or serious lapse (before the ceremony) would permanently defile the girl' (Dube 1953: p. 18). If a girl menstruated before the token marriage she suffered from serious disabilities. She was unable to participate in worship, or go near brides and grooms in weddings. She came under a serious social stigma and was permanently debarred from full and unqualified membership in the community. It is important to note that this pre-pubertal token marriage was also known as the first marriage; once a girl went through it her offenses and lapses were treated by caste authorities like those of a married woman. S. C. Dube has also described the custom of marriage of pre-pubertal girls with an arrow among the Chaukhutia Bhunijia, a tribal group in Chhattisgarh, who were known for a pervasive concern with maintaining the purity of their kitchen where the ancestors were lodged. Thus groups with a serious concern with exclusion or separation can have devices such as a pre-pubertal token marriage for the sake of the purity of their women.

As is reported by a number of authors working in rural areas, marriage is a pre-requisite for conferring full adulthood and personhood on a male too; but there is a critical difference between the two. A man can go through the proper marriage ritual after he has had sexual relations with women and even children through them. There are recent cases from among the migrant Padyachi in East Delhi in which the corpse of an unmarried man was ritually

married to the branch of a plantain tree so that the dead man did not turn into a ghost. My field material from Chhattisgarh also corroborates such a belief, and the related practice of ritually marrying the corpse of a man to an object before cremation/burial.

10. This pertains to a village in Ittawa district of Uttar Pradesh. I owe the information to Kumud Sharma of the Centre for Women's Development Studies who carried out a research project in the region.
11. Rajni Palriwala kindly provided me with this information.
12. It is significant that in many regions if a woman leaves her husband and goes away with a man of the same caste, the second husband has to pay a certain compensation to the previous husband, occasionally a fine, and give a feast for their acceptance as husband and wife by the community; the woman remains within the caste. If a married woman goes away with a man of another caste she is considered lost to the caste, but she — and not her parents — has to shoulder the blame. On the other hand, if an unmarried girl elopes there is great commotion. It is disgraceful, people think, that the parents did not get her properly married at the right time, and traditionally she may not be married with full rites. It is only if the matter is contained and the man is from the same caste that the two may be married off quickly. These days village folk have started resorting to registered marriages in cases of elopement and inter-caste unions. State law then becomes a means to underscore the sanctity of primary marriage.
13. Women have been focal signs and subjects in processes of social mobility and efforts towards raising the status of caste groups. It is well known that in the system of hierarchically graded birth-status groups, change has often taken the form of collective efforts on the part of a caste group to raise its ascribed status through the adoption of practices and beliefs of a ritually higher group. Women have been critical to the process of Sanskritization, the adoption and appropriation of symbols of a higher caste status by middle and lower castes and a simultaneous discarding of practices and customs that are signifiers of a low ritual status. A few illustrations: the imposition of seclusion and restrictions on the freedom of movement of women; their enforced withdrawal from productive activities outside the home; prohibitions on widow remarriage and the concomitant expectation of a life of self-denial and austerity from widows; severe restrictions on divorce and remarriage; and a shift towards dowry from bridewealth and the mutual exchange of gifts between the families of the bride and the groom. The mechanisms of social mobility impose restrictions and constraints on women and make them socially and economically more dependent on men.
14. These observations are based on my reading of matrimonial columns in recent issues of *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times* and *The Navbharat Times*. and in *Sarita*, a Hindi magazine.

15. Large dowries have been common among the Marathas of Maharashtra, Patidars and Anavil Brahmins of Gujarat, the Rajputs of many areas and the Kanyakubj Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh. These castes are internally ranked and practise intra-caste hypergamy (marriage between a lower status female and a higher status male). Compulsions of marrying within well-defined limits combined with internal gradations render the position of these young women and their families precarious. It is not surprising then that some of these groups have practised female infanticide. Srinivas (1976) has observed that until a few decades ago most South Indian castes including Brahmins followed the custom of bride-price. A ceremonial exchange of gifts between affinal families seems to have been the norm. A decrease in marriages among kin, economic and social differentiation within a jati, and the relative expansion of marriage circles covering cognate jatis have perhaps contributed to the escalation of dowry. Interestingly, many strictly endogamous, numerically small, exclusive jatis such as certain Maharashtrian Brahmin castes, the Nagar Brahmins of Gujarat and Chaturvedi Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh, did not practise dowry. Obviously they placed greater value on purity of blood, family traditions, and the bride's familiarity with necessary ritual observances.
16. Young urban girls who are allowed freedom of movement and association are, very often, able to escape the menace of dowry and also do well professionally.
17. In this connection see Dumont (1970) and Srinivas (1976).
18. The recent rise in caste consciousness and ethnic pride has resulted in Jat men discarding their laxity and flexibility in respect of inter-caste unions. Gradually the Jats have come to frown upon the earlier practice of taking low caste women as wives.
19. Consider two instances: In coastal Andhra Pradesh a Kamma girl was involved with a Mala 'Untouchable' boy. She was whisked away and quietly married off within the community. The Mala paramour was found missing. The powerful Kammas had seen to it that he got the punishment he deserved: he was put to death. The issue was taken up by the print media but the Kammas proved to be far too clever and powerful to be brought to book (Lakshmi: personal communication).

In a recent incident in a village located on the Uttar Pradesh-Rajasthan border, a Jat girl and a Jatav boy were hanged on the orders of the Jat-dominated village panchayat. Their crime was elopement. The third person to be hanged was also a Jatav: he had helped the lovers elope. The two 'Untouchable' boys were tortured before they were hanged. The girl had to be hanged because she had continued to express her intentions to marry the Jatav boy (Sidhu in *India Today*, 30 April 1991).

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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CASTE*

M. N. Panini

This paper adopts the perspective of political economy as distinct from the political sociology perspective in order to grasp the changing role and significance of caste in independent India. Political sociology has no doubt highlighted the role of caste in politics and the process of politicization of caste, but it does not relate these processes to economic development which till recently was shaped by socialist strategies espousing the role of the public sector and state control over the private sector. It is contended here that the caste system has considerably influenced the rate and trajectory of economic growth, which in turn has created favourable conditions for the politics of caste-based reservations on the one hand, and secularization and a shift of economic policy favouring liberalization, on the other. It is further argued that the success of the liberalization policy is itself tied up with the politics of caste. While noting that economic liberalization may in the long run dissolve caste-based

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distinctions, it is pointed out that in the short run it may exacerbate inter-caste conflicts and sharpen caste identities.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the era of socialist development in independent India, and focuses primarily on factors that have contributed to the strengthening of caste solidarities. An attempt is made here to show how the ideal of creating a 'casteless and classless society' has been subverted despite several significant changes brought about by planning. Evidence suggests accelerated occupational mobility which has broken down the caste-based division of labour. Yet, such a change was not drastic enough to loosen the hold of caste over the economy. Caste continues to be a salient category in the social infrastructure of the economy. It is argued that socialist policies further strengthened the hold of caste over the economy and has constrained economic performance to what Raj Krishna refers to as the 'Hindu rate of growth'.

The second section seeks to rectify the one-sided emphasis on factors strengthening caste solidarity in the first section. It is primarily devoted to the analysis of the social consequences of the 'Hindu rate of growth'. The argument here is based on the evidence of the burgeoning middle class and of the phenomenon of bourgeoisification. The caste-free lifestyle of the middle class and the trend towards secularization in the middle class is noted. Further, the encouragement provided by bourgeoisification to the policy of economic liberalization and the possible long-term effects of such a policy in weakening the hold of caste are delineated. The discussion in this section also takes note of the contradictory trends which are seemingly strengthening caste identities. One political effect of bourgeoisification, it is pointed out, is the strengthening of the backward class movement which, in many ways, is reinventing the caste system. Further, the tendency for the policy of economic liberalization to sharpen caste antagonisms in the short run, precisely because caste continues to be the organizing principle of the social infrastructure of the economy, is highlighted.

The third and concluding section seeks to make an overall assessment of the complex and often mutually contradictory social implications of the political economy of caste. It is pointed out that

despite sweeping changes in economic policy the caste system is unlikely to wither away and that the latter, at least in the short term, is likely to slow down the pace of economic reforms.

One important contribution of sociology in India has been in countering and correcting popular perceptions regarding various social institutions including the caste system. Sociologists have now effectively challenged the stereotype about the caste system being a closed and rigid system not allowing individuals to give up their hereditary occupation and take up new occupations. Sociologists, beginning with G. S. Ghurye, have highlighted the inherent flexibilities in the system. Ghurye (1961:241-281) pointed out that certain occupations and tasks such as cultivation (except touching of the plough which was prohibited for the Brahmins), administration and military services were open to all castes. He holds that in certain traditional occupations such as weaving there is evidence of the entry of other castes including some of the 'Untouchable' castes such as the Chamar.[1] He also points out that such flexibility extends to modern occupations as well. Using a 1954 restudy of a village in Maharashtra after a gap of over twenty years by one of his students, Ghurye (1961:280-281) shows that modern occupations in the administration and the professions have attracted people belonging to all castes in the village.

After independence, with the adoption of a federal parliamentary democracy based on adult franchise, socialist-planning and protective discrimination in favour of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), occupational mobility across caste boundaries gained momentum. André Béteille (1965), in an early study of a village in Tamil Nadu, showed that caste, class and power have now become differentiated axes of stratification and that the caste status of an individual no longer determines his position in the class or power hierarchy. Thus caste status no longer inhibits individuals from taking to new occupations. Other sociological studies (Sachchidananda 1977; Lerche 1993) have supported such a contention by highlighting the fact that many members of Scheduled Castes have given up

their menial occupations to take up artisanal occupations such as blacksmithy, carpentry, and several white collar occupations. This holds with greater effect for caste Hindus. Occupational diversification has occurred in all castes and it appears that the caste system has adapted itself to the needs of development.

Despite such evidence of occupational diversification, castes continue to be important in different occupations. Thus, in the rural areas, despite land reforms and the introduction of various schemes of rural development, caste is an important unit of the rural economy. Land reforms eliminated the erstwhile absentee landowners and former tenants and cultivators gained possession of land. Translated into caste terms, this meant that some of the upper castes who had been zamindars and jagirdars lost their lands to members of the cultivating castes who have now become middle peasants or rich peasants. In one of the few studies which takes account of both castes and class in agriculture in Tamil Nadu, Joan Mencher (1978:126-159) provides cross tabulations of caste against land ownership, tenancy and agricultural labour. In the nine villages of Chingleput district studied by her, landowners are mainly drawn from the upper castes and from some middle level peasant castes. This, however, does not mean that all the middle and upper caste households are landowners. This also does not rule out the possibility of a few lower caste households acquiring enough land. It does demonstrate, however, that though the composition of landownership has become heterogeneous in terms of caste, upper and middle castes are preponderant in this category. Similarly, her data on agricultural labour households demonstrates the preponderance of castes specializing in low and menial occupations. In a recent study of sugarcane cultivation in southern Gujarat, Breman (1990) highlights the fact that while landowners mostly belong to the dominant caste of Patidars, the labourers who are now being brought in by labour contractors are tribals from Maharashtra. Baviskar (1988:350-351) also notes that the big and medium landowners in village Sanjaya, which is connected to the Amul milk products' cooperative society, belonged mainly to the Patidar caste. Among the landless labourers, members of the lower castes and of the cultivating caste of Baraiya

were in an overwhelming majority. The trend is noticed in Orissa as well. Lerche's (1991) study, which highlights radical changes in the jajmani system in rural Orissa, points out that Dalits *en bloc* have shifted from their traditional menial occupations and have moved into carpentry. Thus, apart from those belonging to the artisan castes, a significant proportion of those engaged in these artisanal occupations now come from the Dalit castes as well. Similarly, findings from Bihar reveal that zamindari abolition has turned the cultivating castes of Yadavas, Kurmis and Koeris into landowning castes (Government of India 1980:155-58). Analysing all-India data on SCs and STs, Thorat (1993) points out that a large proportion of them are agricultural labourers. In comparison, the proportion of agricultural labourers in other castes is smaller. Thus, though rural occupations have now been freed of caste restrictions, there is a marked tendency for certain castes to cluster in particular occupations.

In the urban-industrial milieu, one expects that the significance of caste will be considerably diluted, because achievement rather than ascription is expected to be the dominant criterion governing organizational performance here. However, available evidence suggests that although urban and industrial occupations and professions have attracted members of diverse castes, here too, certain castes tend to be prominent in particular occupations. Such clustering of castes in occupations colour social perceptions considerably, and these in turn contribute to the perpetuation of caste identities as will be demonstrated later.

To begin with, caste composition in the government services reveals that the upper and middle castes form the bulk of the recruitment, especially at the higher levels. The Backward Classes Commission set up by the Government of India (GOI) — popularly known after its chairman as the Mandal Commission — in its report published in 1980 estimates that of the 1,571,638 persons employed in the Central government services and public sector undertakings, 18.72 per cent belong to SCs and STs and 12.55 per cent belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. It is important to note that the representation of SC/ST and OBC declines as one moves

up from Class III and IV services to Class I services. In the lower Class III and IV services their representation is 24.4 and 18.98 per cent respectively. These figures decline to 18.18 per cent and 10.63 per cent for Class II and to a mere 5.68 per cent and 4.69 per cent in the higher reaches of Class I services (Government of India 1980:92). In other words, the upper and middle castes form nearly 90 per cent of the Class I services although according to the Mandal Commission they constitute not more than about 20 per cent of the total population of the country. It may be noted in passing that the SC/ST percentages are higher than that of the OBC because till recently the Central government's protective discrimination policy covered only SCs and STs. A recent compilation of data by J. P. Singh (1993) confirms the trend. In 1990, Brahmins formed more than 50 per cent of Class I category in almost all Central government offices except for the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas and the Ministry of Finance where the representation was 46.3 per cent and 13.9 per cent respectively. It is a well-known fact that till recently there was not a single SC/ST officer among the 40 Secretaries at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy of the Central government; in its three topmost layers there were only a handful of them (Das 1994). A systematic research of élites undertaken by Suren Navlakha (1989) in the 1960s reveals that the upper and middles castes in Delhi dominate élite positions in the country's administrative cadre, the managerial cadre and the modern professions, confirming the clustering of upper castes in the more prestigious jobs in the country. J.P. Singh (1993) confirms that at the all-India level this trend can still be noticed as late as 1989. He finds that Brahmins continue to dominate at the highest offices such as president, prime minister, governors, Union cabinet ministers, chief secretaries of states, vice-chancellors, ambassadors and the like. But it should be observed here that the caste profile of administrative jobs at the level of the states changes if we take note of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, and to a certain extent Maharashtra as well. In these states, vigorous anti-Brahmin movements had been launched as early as the 1920s (Hettne 1978; Government of India 1980:147-50; Thimmaiah 1993 and Omvedt 1994) which forced the concerned governments to grant reservations

to several backward castes then known as the 'depressed classes'. Due to such a reservation policy which was continued even after Independence, the dominant peasant castes in these states are now preponderant in the administration as well as in the professions.

The phenomenon of caste clustering occurs in the professions of engineering, medicine, banking, journalism, colleges, universities and research institutes. Navlakha's (1989) study highlights the concentration of upper and middle castes in the modern professions as well. Evidence of continuing high concentration of upper castes and dominant castes is available from sociological studies of students in higher education, including engineering and medical colleges (Jayaram 1977).[2] Here again, reservation policies for backward castes in some of the states, along with the reservation for SC/ST, have enabled some of the prosperous and dominant peasant castes to increase their representation. Even within the OBC and SC/ST categories, clusterings of relatively more advanced castes and communities are reported in the Central government services. Scheduled Castes such as the Mahars of Maharashtra and the Chamars of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Scheduled Tribes such as the Mizos of Mizoram and the Meenas of Rajasthan, have become conspicuous in the government bureaucracy. In the OBC category, certain castes such as the Kurmis and Koeris of Bihar, the Okkaligas and the Lingayats of Karnataka, the Kanbi Marathas of Maharashtra, Vadugans, Veerakodi Vellalas, Gavaras, Saurashtrians, Thuluva Vellalas and Devangas of Tamil Nadu, the Ezhavas of Kerala, and such others have been able to utilize the reservation policies in their respective states to become significant caste clusters in modern occupations and professions.[3]

In the industrial milieu as well, caste clustering is conspicuous. Thus, an analysis of the social background of industrial entrepreneurs reveals that most of the leading ones hail from trading and business castes and communities. Thus, the Parsis, the Marwaris, the Gujarati Vanias, the Aroras, Khatris and Ramgariah Sikhs of the Punjab, the Khojas and the Bohras among the Muslims of the western coast, and the Chettiars of Tamil Nadu, are some of the prominent entrepreneurial castes and communities in India (Gadgil 1959;

Timberg 1974; and Ray 1992). After Independence they have been joined by Brahmins and members of dominant peasant castes of various regions such as the Patidars of Gujarat, Reddis of Andhra Pradesh, the Goundars and Naidus of Tamil Nadu and the Syrian Christians of Kerala (Singer 1972; Owens 1973; Panini 1979; Sharma 1980). These new entrepreneurs have taken advantage of their access to higher education in engineering and business management to get a foothold in the industrial world.

Caste clustering is noted in the managerial cadre as well. Sagar Jain (1971) and Subramanian (1971) point out that the upper and middle castes are heavily represented in this occupational category. At the lower level white collar occupations as well, some studies highlight the clustering of upper castes (Lambert 1963; Panini 1993).

Extensive evidence of caste clustering among industrial workers is now available from studies of the workforce in the 'organized' as well as the 'unorganized' sectors. Starting with Lambert's (1963) study of Poona factories, one can list several works such as that of Sheth (1968), Holmstrom's (1976) study of Bangalore and his subsequent more extensive study (1985), Panjwani's study (1984) and others which show how the workforce in the organized industrial sector consists of prominent caste and community clusters. The patterning of these caste clusters reveals that in several instances the upper and middle castes and artisan castes dominate the supervisory and skilled worker category whereas the unskilled workers are drawn mainly from the lower castes.

The organized industrial sector, however, only accounts for less than 10 per cent of the industrial labour force in the country (Banerjee 1988: 71-103). Several industrial and urban sociologists have drawn attention to the privileges that workers in this sector enjoy in terms of wage level, job security, provident fund benefits, health insurance and the like. The competition to get a job in sóme of the established industrial firms within the organized sector is so strong that it is difficult to even get one's name on the 'badli' list or the list of substitute workers, who may be called upon to work when the regular workers go home on leave. The remote chance of being absorbed in the regular work force after several years is itself a sufficient incentive

for several of these 'badli' workers to visit the factory gate every day in spite of the uncertainty of a vacancy arising on any given day (Holmstrom 1985:53-55). Besides the 'badli' workers, there are casual workers and those engaged in medium-scale and small-scale industrial units where there is no job security, wages are low and there are long hours of work. John Harriss (1982) has commented from his extensive fieldwork in Coimbatore that those who work in the unorganized sector are from the underprivileged low caste of Chikkiliyans. The situation apparently varies from place to place. In Bombay, Holmstrom (1985:216-17) finds that workers in the unorganized sector are migrants from other parts of the country who are, however, better educated and qualified, thereby suggesting that they belong to the higher castes. But he endorses the point that in the unorganized sector too, caste clustering is a dominant phenomenon (*ibid.*: 247). He is of the view that caste is particularly critical for the underprivileged workers because they lack resources other than those offered by their caste linkages (*ibid.*:247). In Calcutta's unorganized leather industry, concentrations of Jatav (Chamar) self-employed workers from a cluster of villages in Bihar, and of Nepali workers, are found in tanning leather; workers engaged in making leather sports goods are mostly Mochis and Muslims from Bihar (Ghosh 1988:138–52).

Many of the workers in the unorganized sector have, over the years, worked their way up to become prosperous traders and entrepreneurs. Examples of members of low status Rana castes making it big in the zari industry, of similarly placed Ghanchi caste establishing its hold on the textile industry and trade in Surat point to a widespread phenomenon whose implications for social change are yet to be fully worked out (Engineer 1994:1350–54). The evidence for caste clustering should be evaluated in the context of evidence which also highlights clustering along the lines of region, language and religion or even friendship and acquaintance. The latter types of social linkages may neutralize or work against the principle of caste. Although this is a theoretical possibility, in empirical instances no conflict between caste and other loyalties are reported, partly because relationships are articulated contextually. Thus, the 'sons

of the soil' movements which have caught on in some cities and industrial centres have to a certain extent underplayed caste divisions by making linguistic or regional background more salient. Holmstrom (1985) mentions that the Shiv Sena movement in Bombay has contributed to the prominence of Marathi-speaking workers — both upper caste and Dalits — in the industrial units in the organized sector.[4] But the movement has been dominated by the OBCs. This holds true of the farmer movements led by the Bharatiya Kisan Union in western Uttar Pradesh as well. Although this movement makes an appeal to all farmers irrespective of religion and caste, and makes a special point of integrating Muslims within its fold, it has been built around the institutional resources and organizational style of the Jat *khap* (Lerche 1995:503–04).[5] Similarly, the Lingayats and Okkaligas have dominated the farmers' movement in Karnataka.[6] The point being stressed here is that quite often, the articulation of principles other than caste in mobilizing people's participation in social movements does not necessarily weaken caste solidarities but may even strengthen them.

The phenomenon of caste clustering under the impact of industrialization has been documented for the colonial period as well. Joshi (1981:1823-1838), writing about recruitment in Kanpur's textile mills during the 1920s and 1930s, notes that workers from particular castes dominated in particular textile mills, and often in particular departments of these mills. Thus, if Brahmins were conspicuous in one mill, in another it would be the Koeris or the Chamars. Historical studies of Calcutta's jute mills (Chakrabarty 1989:9) and of Bombay's textile mills (Newman 1981:51) also highlight the process of caste clustering.[7]

A variety of plausible explanations may be offered for the phenomenon of caste clustering in modern occupations. One line of reasoning is that under the impact of colonialism certain castes because of their skills and resources, found themselves in vantage positions to exploit economic opportunities that were opened up while it put the other castes at a disadvantage by closing the opportunities they previously enjoyed. This is the type of analysis of mobility that Bailey (1957) provides of the tribal village of Bisipara

in Orissa. Boad and Ganjam distillers of the village were able to exploit market opportunities thrown open by the British rule to make profits and buy land from the warrior class, who were the original landowners. This is similar to Saberwal's (1976) analysis of the success of Ramgariahs, traditional village artisans in Punjab, who were able to upgrade their skills and exploit the opportunities opened up by the British railway network. Gail Omvedt (1994:85-87) holds that colonialism had a complex effect: Brahmins gained because of the educational opportunities that were opened up; the former rulers and 'Kshatriya' power-holders lost while the lower castes and Dalits joined the ranks of a mobile, exploited proletariat. These accounts explain why certain castes experienced upward or downward mobility, but fail to point out why, under the influence of market forces, castes continued to be significant in the economic structure.

One clue to the phenomenon, however, is provided by Amiya Bagchi (1975), who has highlighted the imperfections in the labour market. He notes the unusual concentrations of workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in Calcutta and Bombay, and is of the view that the demand for labour did not create its own supply. The factory-owners had to use jobbers to attract labourers. The jobbers articulated their caste, kinship and village links to persuade workers to migrate to distant towns and cities. Thus, the caste and regional background of workers in a particular factory or in a particular department in a factory could be accounted for by the caste or regional background of the jobbers. This line of argument regards the institution of the jobber as pivotal in structuring the labour force and labour-management relations.[8] After Independence, the institution of the jobber gradually disappeared in the organized sector, but labour contractors operate in the construction industry and in rural areas. In the organized private sector employers prefer to recruit workers 'known' to them or to responsible persons in the firm. The idea is that workers selected through personal contacts can be more effectively controlled. Personal contacts that are articulated also include caste and kinship ties (Holmstrom 1985).

In the case of entrepreneurship as well, evidence suggests the active use of caste and kinship networks. The Marwari diaspora

across the subcontinent is accounted for by the institution of bhasa (community hostels) that Marwari businessmen established, and by their apprenticeship system according to which a Marwari trader trains his kin and relatives in his own establishment before setting them up as his agents in nearby towns or cities (Timberg 1974). Industrial entrepreneurs too find that caste and kinship ties are useful in promoting their economic interests and in expanding their industrial base (Panini 1979).

The instances mentioned above serve to highlight one important feature of caste: membership of a caste makes a person part of a person-based social network which controls insiders' information about economic opportunities, transmits skills and provides varied types of human and material support. Hence the social network of a caste itself becomes an important social resource for its members. Further, it is argued here that the conditions created by the socialist economic regime reinforced the tendency for a person who becomes privy to knowledge of a certain economic opportunity or for a person who gains access to a new economic opportunity to retain such advantages largely for the benefit of members of his kin and caste network.

The above-mentioned feature of caste can be analytically distinguished from the in-built differential advantages conferred on certain castes in competitive situations where universalistic norms prevail. Thus, Brahmins and certain castes of scribes were the first to take advantage of the educational opportunities opened up by the British rule because their traditional association with learning gave them the initial cultural advantage. Similarly, several members of the Marwari community could become the 'banians' of British agency houses and reap the advantages of an expanding trade network in the colonial era because of the early training they received in marketing and financial management by virtue of their caste membership. It may seem that this feature of the caste system confers only certain initial advantages to members of certain castes in a context which stresses achievement orientation and competition, but in reality it is mixed with the particularizing role of caste to such an extent that it makes a mockery of achievement itself. This feature of

the caste system is poignantly brought out in the Mandal Commission report when it refers to the unfair advantages enjoyed by an urban high caste boy *vis-à-vis* a rural, low caste boy in qualifying for a career in the bureaucracy (Government of India 1980:23).

To a certain extent caste clustering during the colonial era can be attributed to the slow pace of industrialization and economic stagnation. As economic opportunities did not expand sufficiently it can be argued that people sought to cling to whatever economic opportunities they initially had, and attempted to preserve them for their kin. But after Independence, a conscious effort was made by the government to accelerate the pace of economic development and attain the goal of a 'socialist pattern' of society. The strategy relied on a policy of promoting the public sector so that it could control 'the commanding heights of the economy'. It also attempted to regulate the growth of the private sector through a panoply of licensing and restrictive quotas for the allocation of scarce resources. It aimed at rapid industrialization with emphasis on the growth of basic and heavy industries (Maddison 1971). Implicit in this strategy of development was the hope that modern industrialization would transform India into a 'casteless and classless society', a goal which inspired the freedom struggle. It was hoped that with development, ascriptive values would gradually give way to values stressing achievement in a vibrant modern society espousing universalistic ideals.

It is clear that these hopes have remained unfulfilled despite over four decades of planning. Although the rate of economic growth has increased in comparison to the colonial period, it remains at an average of 3.5 per cent per annum. Caste clustering in occupations persists and inter-caste politics, which was so far confined to the states, has become salient at the national level as well, thereby sharpening caste consciousness. All these can be partly attributed to the development strategy pursued by the government.

If caste clustering is a persisting phenomenon even today it is partly due to the economic controls and regulations that socialist planning entailed. These controls and regulations were so detailed and pervasive that they affected every aspect of the existence of

private sector enterprises. It is of course undeniable that such a regime of economic control was created in order to curb the growth of monopoly and ensure distributive justice with economic growth. Thus, for example, the company law was amended in the year 1956 (Panini 1988:M88-M89) to ensure that control over private sector enterprises was not exclusively vested within closely-knit family and kinship circles. The amendment also sought to regulate the remuneration and perquisites of the directors of a company and its executives with a view to ensuring equitable distribution of income. The Industries Act (Development and Regulation) of 1951 sought to regulate the growth of industries in the national interest. It stipulated that industrial investments over a given ceiling required prior government sanction in the form of licences. Such licensing was justified on the grounds of curbing the growth of monopolies, of ensuring full utilization of capacity, and of avoiding the wastes of competition, i.e., wastage of critical resources such as iron and steel, imported machinery, components, and raw materials. Licensing was also justified on the ground that investments, especially large ones, needed to be dispersed socially and regionally in order to promote equity and balanced regional development. Mention may also be made of the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act of 1969 which stipulated restrictions over and above those imposed by the licensing policy to curb the growth of big business houses. To distribute scarce raw materials to priority sectors and to ensure conservation of foreign exchange, the government introduced an elaborate system of quotas of scarce raw materials and of import quotas to private enterprises (Bhagwati and Desai 1970) and passed the Foreign Exchange Regulations Act of 1973. To ensure social security to industrial workers and protect working class rights, the government amended existing labour laws and enacted new laws providing provident fund facilities, health insurance and compulsory bonus. The Industrial Disputes Act of 1948 was passed to regulate industrial conflict and ensure that disputes were settled through arbitration.

The structure of controls and regulations that was erected made it difficult for entrepreneurs to operate in the economy without

transgressing them. Entrepreneurs who applied for a licence or quota had to first go through elaborate procedures and prepare adequate documentation to support their claims. Further, after submitting the applications, they had to confront long delays in decision-making on the part of concerned government agencies, so much so that even if the ultimate decision was favourable, the ensuing delay would have created considerable cost escalation. Even those who preferred not to seek any concessions from the government had to confront numerous government functionaries to fulfil several governmental stipulations leaving them little time and resources to pursue the objects of increasing productivity and of improving efficiency (Government of India 1969; Bhagwati and Desai 1970).

In such a situation, successful entrepreneurs resorted to schemes and devices by which they could skirt and subvert these onerous laws and regulations. Having violated the laws, they needed trustworthy managers who could keep their firms' secrets. Hence, they preferred to reserve critical control positions in the firm with members of the family and to recruit managers using ties of caste and kinship. Loyalty acquired a high premium in recruiting workers as well. Given the gamut of labour laws which the employers considered pro-labour in thrust, it was important to have a disciplined and manageable workforce to avoid 'labour trouble'. The regime of socialist regulation provided an added incentive for the employers to recruit workers by articulating their particularistic ties. For instance, Panjwani (1984:273) quotes a production superintendent in Mancraft Machine Company in Bombay thus:

> Naturally we prefer to recruit new workers through reliable channels. The man coming from the employment exchange is a total stranger to us. Newspaper advertisements are all right in the case of officers' and engineers' posts. But in the workers' case our experience has been that it is safer to take in a person coming in through a person we know. You don't know these workers — they can misbehave, damage machinery or may even be violent rioter types. At least when we recruit through

> someone we know, we can mostly be sure that the man acting as a link will take moral responsibility for the newcomer . . .

In a situation of acute unemployment, jobs in industrial units, that too in the organized sector where workers are protected by labour laws, are highly coveted. Hence workers too use their caste and kinship ties to gain access to information about vacancies and to influence the managers responsible for recruitment to favour their relatives and friends. Such influence peddling has become a common and even an accepted way of getting jobs, so much so that special local words are coined to refer to this method of getting a job. In some places in North India it is referred to as the practice of using a 'source'. Panjwani (1984:274) reports that in the case of Bombay factory workers, those who could influence recruitment decisions were known as 'those who have jack'.

The phenomenon of articulating particularistic networks to get jobs has pervaded the public sector units as well. Holmstrom (1976) points out that politicians, influential labour leaders and managers are approached by job-seekers in the public sector units. In some of the public sector units in Bangalore, the presence of a large number of workers from outside the state of Karnataka is attributed to the influence exercised by important officials in the past in getting workers belonging to their region and caste appointed.

The regime of licences and quotas placed a premium on caste in yet another way. Entrepreneurs who could establish informal links through caste ties with officials, lower level functionaries in the government agencies, politicians, bankers and such others could gain access to critical insider's information like details of policy changes, dates on which important committees meet to consider various applications for licences, loans or quotas, new procedures being evolved, criteria adopted in deciding on various applications, and a host of other such items. To cultivate such social links, entrepreneurs relied, among other things, on their caste and kinship networks (Panini 1979).

The regime of economic control indirectly contributed to the

strengthening of caste ties by encouraging the growth of the unorganized sector. Aspects of labour policy which sought to protect workers made employers reluctant to expand their workforce; a large workforce would make them liable to overhead expenditure on bonus, provident fund, employees' health insurance and the like and invite 'labour trouble' by encouraging trade unionism. One way of avoiding such problems was to subcontract various jobs to smaller establishments. Several big corporations deliberately encouraged their trusted senior employees to set up workshops to supply components and other types of inputs (Panini 1979). Such subcontracting which was popular in the engineering industries, is now being used in the chemical industry as well. For example, a leading multinational corporation, when confronted with a trade union strike in one of its detergent processing units in 1988 subcontracted the process. Besides curbing labour militancy, such subcontracting strategies prove to be beneficial to the larger corporations in several ways.

The subcontracting strategy is adopted by public sector units as well; as a matter of policy they encourage the growth of ancillary units through subcontracting arrangements. Here too, particularistic ties with the key officials in the public sector corporation help in getting such subcontracting orders. Often those responsible for distributing such jobs themselves establish small-scale units in the names of their relatives and friends to take advantage of some of the more lucrative subcontracting jobs. Thus even public sector corporations indirectly reinforce the social and economic significance of caste and kinship.

Particularistic linkages of kinship affinity and caste prove vital to enterprises in the organized sector in gaining business contacts, access to officials in various government agencies, and in labour recruitment. This should not, however, lead one to believe that such enterprises exclusively rely on particularistic ties and institutions. Enterprises in the organized sector encounter several persons and institutions with whom they cannot relate on the basis of particularistic ties. In the modern industrial environment, entrepreneurs have to be capable of relating to other enterprises and

governmental institutions using impersonal and universalistic norms as well. In fact, there is evidence of some enterprises deliberately avoiding recruiting workers who are related through caste and kinship (Holmstrom 1985). There are a few successful industrial enterprises which have relied mainly on universalistic professional norms in recruitment and management. They have acquired a reputation for being modern and progressive. Such cases, however, are rare.

In the case of enterprises in the unorganized sector, the dependence on particularistic ties and institutions is near total because entrepreneurs as well as workers are less educated, and are not endowed with the professional resources required to work in formal institutions. In fact, these unorganized sector enterprises rely more on the primitive putting-out systems of work organization, on private moneylenders, and employ mostly women and children in home-based units in order to cut the wage bill. Some of these enterprises have acquired notoriety for using bonded labour, unwholesome working conditions, and variable and inordinately long working hours. Mention can be made here of the bidi industry of Karnataka, the glass bangle industry of Rajasthan, the carpet industry of Uttar Pradesh, and the match industry of Tamil Nadu.

Thus, the pervasive phenomenon of clustering in the Indian economy has been reinforced by socialist planning strategies. Although development has promoted occupational mobility of individuals across the boundaries of caste, caste continues to be significant in the social infrastructure of the economy.

Caste clustering may, under certain circumstances, promote economic development. As a matter of fact, several sociologists commenting on economic development and social change during the 1950-1960s highlighted the adaptive features of the caste system, and the inherent potential of caste ties in mobilizing scarce capital and other human resources essential for development. Milton Singer (1972:272-382) went further to title one of his papers, 'Industrial Leadership, the Hindu Ethic and the Spirit of Socialism' thereby suggesting that not only is the caste system flexible enough to promote planned economic development but also that the Hindu ethos that informs such flexibility in the caste system promotes the socialist

spirit. This view is in consonance with Yogendra Singh's (1973:172) observation that 'caste alone in India provides a pre-existing structural framework for the diffusion of and mobilization of "new role structures".'

The above view, however, ignores the tendency towards monopolization of privileges that caste clusterings create within the economic system. In a social structure in which there is differential access to vital information, resources and educational opportunities, the governmental regime of economic regulation and control further constrain the free flow of resources and information. In such a situation, castes which gain access to certain critical economic opportunities are likely to ensure that such advantages remain with them. According to Holmstrom (1985) such a trend essentially works at the level of individuals who, in a situation marked by severe competition over scarce resources, want to ensure that their children inherit their economic privileges. In support of his contention, he quotes agreements between trade unions and managements in several firms stipulating that vacancies created by retiring workers should be filled by their relatives. But his argument discounts the fact that in India individuals are still enmeshed in networks of mutual support provided by caste and kinship. Thus, knowledge about job opportunities in reputed industrial corporations and in the government is likely to first reach those who are within such organizations, who in turn use their networks to promote the interests of relatives and friends. It is true that in several cases, and especially in the case of government jobs, there is a stipulation that recruitment should be through advertisement and open selection. Even in such cases of details regarding job specifications, the background of members of the selection committee and their interests etc. may place those who have social links with people inside the system at an advantage. In the field of entrepreneurship, caste links have proved effective in strengthening one's position in the market. For instance, observers have pointed out that the Birlas recruit only trusted members of their kin and caste circle to important positions in their business empire and that they are able to pre-empt competition for quotas and licences by filing multiple applications in the names of such

trusted persons (Government of India 1969; Panini 1988). Some economists who have attempted to assess the growth of big business houses have expressed their frustration at not being able to provide an exhaustive list of firms belonging to them, because it is difficult to trace the linkages that connect a big business house with its subsidiaries (Goyal 1979). Further, for the same reason, many of the big entrepreneurs have not only subverted laws which restrict the growth of monopolies but have used such laws to further their interests. One example is the practice of opening small-scale units in the names of close relatives and trusted caste fellows. This practice not only enables the big entrepreneur to strengthen his monopolistic hold but also helps him to obtain the incentives and concessions offered by the government to small-scale industries to disperse ownership and promote the growth of employment opportunities. Thus, the institution of caste has not merely adapted itself to the exigencies of socialist development, it has undermined the goal of socialism and has reinforced monopolizing tendencies. Such monopolizing tendencies have created a rentier economy leading to output restriction and low productivity which has been extensively commented upon by economists (Bhagwati 1993). It can be noticed that this argument seems to support the Weberian thesis on Hinduism's dampening effect on economic development (Weber 1978). But a proper confirmation of the Weberian thesis requires an assessment of the social consequences of four decades of socialist development. The next section is devoted to the explication of the contradictory social and economic trends generated by the slow-paced growth of the last four decades.

One major social consequence of a socialist strategy of development is the formation of a sizeable modern middle class. I use the term middle class to refer to families who derive their incomes from modern professions and white collar occupations both in the government and in the private sector and from entrepreneurship. The formation of a modern middle class in India can be traced to the colonial era when Macaulay's policy of promoting Western education in English

was adopted (Singh 1973:102). The establishment of schools and colleges to impart Western education to Indians so as to cater to the needs of an expanding bureaucracy gave rise to a class of white collar workers, managers and professionals who were influenced by Western values of universalism, egalitarianism, freedom and democracy. This class produced many important personalities, both men and women, who played a prominent role in various reform movements and in the nationalist movement. Several members of this class became influential politicians, lawyers and administrators and as such, role models for others. In the states of peninsular India, several leaders of the backward class movements whose initial stirrings may be traced back to the nineteenth century, considered access to Western education and adequate representation in the legislatures and the bureaucracy as critical for the emancipation of their classes (Omvedt 1994).

There are indications that the pace of the formation of the middle class has gathered momentum after Independence. As the government began implementing its socialist strategy of development, it established several public sector enterprises, launched rural development programmes, built schools and colleges, nationalized several commercial banks, set up government-run financial institutions, and took over numerous functions of monitoring and controlling the economy. The number of persons employed by the government increased substantially. According to a recent estimate, by the end of March 1988 there were 257.48 lakh persons employed in the organized sector, of which 183.26 lakhs were in the public sector, that is, more than 71 per cent of the total workforce in the organized sector (Government of India 1989:11). The number employed in the public sector has grown dramatically from about 70 lakhs in 1960-61 to 183.26 lakhs in 1987-88. Employment in the public sector as a proportion of the total employment in the organized sector has increased from 58.3 per cent in 1960-61 to 71.2 per cent in 1987-88 (*ibid.* 1989:309). Further, on the basis of data gathered by the Mandal Commission, it appears that less than 38 per cent of those employed by the Central government are engaged in public sector enterprises; the rest are employed in the offices of various

ministries and departments, autonomous bodies and subordinate offices (Government of India 1980:92). Thus, going by the available data on employment in the organized sector, the development strategy of the government made it the dominant employer. Since a sizeable portion of government employees belong to the white collar category, it can be inferred that the developmental activities of the government have increased the size of the middle class and made it a significant social category, because members of this class have found a firm foothold in the government bureaucracy. Estimates of the size of the middle class vary because there is no fixed definition of the 'middle class'. Recently, *The Times of India* reported that according to the data gathered by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) the middle class comprises of 60 million households consisting of about 300 million persons (3 October 1993). Robert Stern (1993:5-6) presents the following data on income distribution gathered by the NCAER to estimate the size of the Indian middle class:

Table: Household Incomes in India (1989-90)

Income Group	Income Per Annum (Rs)	No. of People (in millions)	Percentage of Population
Low Income	Less than 12,000	420	59.0
Lower Middle	12,500 - 25,000	192	27.0
Middle	25,000 - 40,000	72	10.0
Upper Middle	40,000 - 56,000	19	2.6
High Income	More than 56,000	10	1.4

On the basis of the above table, Stern concludes that about 85 to 170 million persons, that is, between 10 to 20 per cent of the population of the country, constitute the Indian middle class. Further, if the data presented above is combined with the available data on the incidence of poverty it can be inferred that the middle class is growing both in absolute and relative terms. According to recent

estimates of an expert group constituted by the Planning Commission, the percentage of population living below the poverty line has declined from 55 in 1973-74 to around 40 in 1987-88 (Government of India 1994:148, Table 9.5). Hence, in the last four decades the size of the middle class has increased significantly. Many of the new recruits to the middle class are drawn from the upwardly mobile peasant castes including the Kurmis, Koeris and Yadavas of Bihar, Jats of Haryana and Jat Sikhs of Punjab, the Okkaligas and Lingayats of Karnataka, the Patidars of Gujarat, the Reddis of Andhra Pradesh and Vellalas of Tamil Nadu. The new recruits also include members of several castes which had been associated with lowly and polluting occupations. These castes can now point with pride to many of their relatives who are in prestigious white collar urban occupations and professions besides being leading entrepreneurs. The path of upward mobility for many of them was opened by agricultural prosperity in the wake of land reforms and the green revolution. Some of these castes such as the Kurmis, Koeris and Yadavas of Bihar, and the Okkaligas and Lingayats of Karnataka, and some sections of the Vellalas of Tamil Nadu were benefited by the reservation policies of their respective state governments. Similarly, members of some Dalit castes and a few Scheduled Tribes have also moved up thanks to the reservation policy. The socialist strategy of development adopted by the state also threw open economic opportunities from which some of the lowly placed castes derived considerable advantages. Thus in the states of South India, members of castes associated with toddy tapping were able to take advantage of urban expansions and even of prohibition policy adopted in some of the states to become leading entreprenuers. Several fishing communities along the west coast are reported to have become prosperous allegedly from being associated with smuggling which proved to be lucrative because of the regime of import substitution. The prosperity of the city of Surat in Gujarat is attributed to the dynamism of the Rana, Ganchi, Khaswa and Machli castes which were associated with lowly occupations such as cowherding, oil pressing and fishing (Engineer 1994). It may also be noted that there is a visible middle class component among some upwardly mobile Muslims. Hence the middle class is

now a heterogeneous social category. Although the upper castes such as the Brahmins, Kayasthas and Rajputs constitute a significant proportion of the middle class, the share of the non-twice born castes in it is not negligible. And that share is increasing.

Since in India the middle class is mainly the creation of the government, it enjoys high prestige in society. And this is linked to the vast patronage that is vested in government offices, thanks to the strategy of socialist development. Without the intervention of a government official it is difficult to get things done, be it procuring a quota for steel import or even securing a ration card. It is not surprising that government officers and other functionaries who can get things done command great respect from the people.

The social heterogeneity of the middle class makes it difficult to speak of a unique middle class culture. Yet some common cultural markers of this class can be identified. One such feature is the trend towards secularization noticed in the lifestyle of its members. The secularizing trend exhibits itself in the compartmentalization of rituals and of purity and pollution considerations. This can be noticed in the increasing inter-caste commensality among the members of the middle class. Such commensality can be observed in the way they celebrate certain festivals such as Durga Puja, Ganesh Chaturthi, Dussehra and Deepavali. This holds true of Muslim celebrations of Id as well. Invariably on such occasions rituals tend to get abridged, and even recede into the background. This holds true also for various other religious ceremonies, be it the celebration of a marriage or a death ceremony (Srinivas 1969). In urban areas it has now become common to celebrate birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and New Year's Eve which have acquired an entirely secular character. During such celebrations new secular rituals such as the cutting of a cake have become widespread. Also, there has been an increasing trend towards inter-caste and even inter-religious marriages among the middle class. Inter-caste marriages across sub-caste boundaries, or 'second order divisions' have become frequent even among the more conservative castes belonging to the middle class (Shah and Desai 1988:1-38). Increasingly, even marriage cutting across varna categories and across religious boundaries is getting to be widely

accepted in urban areas. I. P. Desai (*ibid.*:67) optimistically notes that in Gujarat caste divisions are becoming secular and 'caste patriotism' is on the decline.

Secularization of the middle class has been accompanied by a stress on secular criteria for judging 'success'. High social status is attached to those who are able to get into one of the prestigious professions, or the government services. The prestige attached to a career in medicine or engineering is so great that parents are prepared to pay hefty capitation fees to get their wards admitted to engineering and medical colleges. In Karnataka, till the Supreme Court recently passed an order regulating the payment of 'capitation fees', some private engineering colleges charged Rs 1,00,000, while medical colleges charged about Rs 5,00,000, substantial sums for even employees getting high salaries in the government. These colleges attracted students from all over India, testifying to the all-India spread of the middle class values of 'success'. An incident which occurred in 1992 in the state of Mizoram poignantly highlights this feature. It refers to the students' protest against the state government's decision to allot a seat in the MBBS course from the government's quota to the daughter of a non-tribal officer of the Indian Police Service who had recently been posted there. The students demanded that the quota should be used only for the Mizos and organized a Mizoram bandh, forcing the government to withdraw its order. Seats in medical and engineering courses have indeed become important status symbols.

Stress on a 'successful' career also implies stress on education. Middle class parents consider education an investment for the future for both boys and girls. Education for girls is also valued because an educated woman with a job has better prospects of finding a suitable bridegroom. To cater to the needs of such parents, private schools and 'convents' carrying names such as Little Angels, Unesco and Disneyland (Drury 1993:110), teaching mostly in English instead of an Indian language, have mushroomed all over urban India. The general preference for 'English-medium' schools is causing embarrassment to politicians and the votaries of the mother tongue as the medium of school instruction. In Karnataka, the demand for opening English medium primary schools was so persistent that the

state government decided to open several such schools in rural areas, going against its own stated policy of encouraging Kannada in the school curriculum! Further, in Karnataka as well as in other states, private schools are now demanding substantial 'donations' from parents for giving admission to their children even at the kindergarten level. The anxiety of middle class parents about their children 'succeeding' in life is also revealed by the numerous teaching shops which have sprung up in urban areas to coach candidates for various competitive examinations for admission into engineering, medical, computer programming and business management courses, and for the All India Civil Services Examinations held every year.

Stress on obtaining good education is only one dimension of the meaning of 'success' to the middle class. Success has also acquired an instrumentalist, materialist interpretation for the middle class. Unlike earlier generations of the middle class which were influenced by nationalist ideals and the Gandhian values of frugality, members of the present generation aspire to a 'consumerist' lifestyle which stresses the acquisition and display of various consumer goods. Market surveys reveal that the sales of various types of consumer goods ranging from toothbrushes, toilet soaps, detergents, shampoos, shaving blades, cosmetics and clothes to colour televisions, cars, refrigerators and washing machines have been registering a steady growth. It is important to note here that such consumption is regarded as necessary not just for coping with the demands of modern living but also for the prestige value that is attached to such a lifestyle. It is this aspect of prestige that gets reflected in the excessive dowry demands made by parents of eligible bridegrooms and in the incidents of 'bride burning' that are regularly reported in newspapers. Further, this 'consumerist' interpretation of 'success' is also related to the status attached to emigration to one of the first world countries for higher education and for jobs. Commenting on this aspect of middle class culture, Srinivas notes that middle class parents, instead of patriotically encouraging their children who have settled abroad to return to the country, now want them to stay there and are even proud of their new status as non-resident Indians (NRIs). According to him, such emigration has become so widespread that having at

least one member among close kin living abroad has now become an essential attribute of the middle class!

The consumerist, instrumentalist, and for that matter the 'secular' aspects of lifestyles suggest that the middle class is affected by the secularization process. For Srinivas (1969:119) secularization is a process which 'implies that what was previously regarded as religious is now ceasing to be such and it also implies a process of differentiation which results in various aspects of society, economic, political, legal and moral, becoming increasingly *discrete* in relation to each other' [emphasis author's]. Secularization, however, does not necessarily entail that the importance of religion recedes in the life of the middle class. There is a strong tendency among members of the middle class to seek the help of gurus and godmen who they believe have supernatural powers to solve their practical 'problems' in life. A variety of gurus and godmen including Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, Chinmayananda, Muktananda, Dadaji, Nirmala Devi and others attract hordes of devotees from the middle class. An aspect of this magical orientation to religion is the popularity of astrology. Harassed parents of marriageable young women, of children who have not been able to 'settle down' in life with good jobs, those suffering from health problems and such others visit astrologers frequently to know what the future holds for them and to perform the prescribed pujas and rituals to reduce the 'evil effects' of planetary forces. This dependence on magic also indicates an unwillingness to adopt a critical and reflective attitude towards religious issues which makes the middle class as prone to the manipulation of religious demagogues as the unlettered masses. Hence, despite its secularization, the middle class in India cannot be relied upon to act as a buffer between the contending forces of communalism in the country. In this context, the recent recruits to the middle class, both among the Hindus and Muslims are different; they tend to be aggressively religious and support political parties which fan the communal embers (see for instance Engineer 1994).

The significance of the middle class stems not only from the weight of its numbers but from the fact that its lifestyle has become a model for emulation by the upwardly mobile sections of industrial workers,

rural peasant castes, and lower castes in the society. Thus, for the industrial workers who have to perform manual work every day with little prospect of promotion, officers' jobs appear cushy and comfortable. A highly skilled worker in a Bombay engineering industrial unit commented on his superiors in the management thus:

> I would not have to suffer this bloody slavery day in day out had I been educated beyond class VII, would I? If I had a degree like those fellows I too would have been sitting in a chair giving orders to all and sundry! (Panjwani 1984:277–78).

Similar views are expressed by peasants who have been historically subject to revenue extraction by the state. Thus for many of them, a bureaucrat is a person who wields power and commands the respect of others without having to do back-breaking manual labour. Besides he earns a regular monthly salary and does not have to face uncertain crop prospects that is the hallmark of agricultural work. Hence aspirations for a middle class lifestyle have become widespread. These upwardly mobile workers and peasants also send their children to schools and colleges, and would like them to become engineers or doctors. Since many of them have no access to good schooling, they have to be satisfied with sending their children to ill-equipped schools and colleges. Such schools and colleges cannot provide good education, but to retain students and establish some legitimacy for themselves they adopt several interesting schemes. One such scheme is to offer a 'pass guarantee', that is, to pass and promote all students. Such 'pass guarantee' schemes occasionally involve allowing students to indulge in 'mass copying'. 'Mass copying' refers to the system of allowing all the examinees to copy from their textbooks and notes. Some examination centres are even reputed to encourage teachers to help the examinees answer the questions. In Uttar Pradesh, copying at examinations became a major issue in the 1993 elections to the state Assembly. The Samajwadi Janata Party and Bahujan Samaj Party alignment came to power partly because of the electoral promise given by Mulayam Singh Yadav, ex-Chief Minister, to repeal

the Anti-Copying Act that had been enacted by the previous BJP government, and to withdraw all cases booked under the Act. Justifying the decision to repeal the Act, a party spokesman pointed out that it adversely affected students of the backward classes and poorer sections of society by denying them opportunities for career advancement!

Uttar Pradesh is not the only state where 'mass copying' has become a major social issue. Reports of mass copying and cheating in various examinations come from various parts of the country including Delhi which is well served in the matter of good schools and colleges. That it has become a widespread practice is a commentary on the strength of the process of bourgeoisification. As in the case of Sankritization, emulation of the lifestyle of the middle class also involves a defiance of values stressing achievement cherished by the middle class.

The phenomenon of 'mass-copying' cannot be regarded as a social aberration. Its implicit rejection of achievement orientation becomes explicit in the backward class movement which is now undergoing a scalar transformation thanks to the decision of the Janata Dal government (in 1989) at the Centre to accept and to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report in regard to reservation of jobs in the Central Government services to the 'socially and economically backward classes' (SEBCs). This momentous decision[9] set in motion a process of political polarization at the national level which has cut across party lines and is still working itself out in the political arena. The ideology of 'social justice' articulated by this movement holds that the representation of backward classes in the bureaucracy and the professions should be equal to the proportion of these 'classes' in the total population. According to the proponents of this ideology, the upper caste élite of the country have denied a fair share of power to the backward classes who are in a majority by advocating the principles of 'merit'. They debunk merit as a spurious idea not only because of inequalities in society but also because they hold that upper castes have used it as a cover to monopolize privileges for members of their own castes. In this regard the Mandal Commission Report marshals persuasive

evidence to demonstrate the tendency of upper castes to form 'cliques' within the government (Government of India 1980).

This type of argument was taken to its logical conclusion by the postgraduate Dalit students of the University of Mysore in1991 when they agitated against 'unfair' evaluation of their examination scripts. They held the view that all Dalits should be given a first class because by denying it, the teachers were hurting their chances of getting jobs and hence their life prospects. They alleged that their teachers, many of them from non-Brahmin castes, were practising 'Brahminical elitism'.

It may be noticed that the main agenda of the backward class movement triggered off by the Mandal Commission Report is the capture of power for the backward classes. It emphasizes reservation of jobs in government services and in institutions of higher education, especially in the professional courses, because such positions are vested with power and open the door to lucrative careers. But this is not to deny the impact of bourgeoisification which has played a role in legitimizing power and interpreting authority. In the past, Sanskritization played such a role but now the backward class movements are consciously playing down Sanskritization strategies. For these movements equality and social justice are translated in terms of gaining secular status, which explains the importance attached to a middle class lifestyle reflecting a consumerist, instrumentalist ethos.

The backward class movement as an aspect of the process of bourgeoisification sharpens caste identities all round. Thus, for instance, the anti-Mandal agitation that was launched by students[10] in several cities of North India exhibited its ugly face when derogatory casteist slogans were used to caricature pro-Mandal politicians and students. This demonstrates that even educated members of the upper castes cannot shed their caste prejudices, thereby proving the position of Mandal supporters that caste continues to be a basic feature of the Indian social reality even among the educated sections of urban society.

It is now necessary to grasp the social logic of the rise of the backward castes movement at the national level. With the acceptance

of the Mandal Commission Report, three broad categories of castes have gained political recognition, namely, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Backward Castes, and the upper castes. This three-fold division is likely to get differentiated further if the social logic of backward class reservations in states such as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka is any indication. In Tamil Nadu, some of the more advanced backward castes have been able to corner most of the jobs and seats reserved for the backward classes. In a study prepared for the Mandal Commission it was stated that nine such castes constituting a mere 11.7 per cent of the total backward class population had cornered 37.3 per cent of the non-gazetted, and 48.2 per cent of the gazetted posts (Government of India 1980:148-49). This was the reason for the Vanniyars, the single largest backward caste in the state, to launch an agitation a few years ago demanding that 20 per cent of the jobs and seats reserved for OBCs as a whole should be earmarked for them. In Karnataka, in order to protect the interests of the more backward sections of the backward classes, the Havanur Commission on backward classes recommended separate quotas for 'backward tribes', 'backward castes' and 'backward communities', which was accepted in a modified form by the government. Besides the quotas, a strict rota system for filling posts and for promotions was also accepted. But even this method did not prove satisfactory. Some Okkaligas are now complaining that the Gangadikar and Morasu subdivisions of their caste are cornering the benefits of reservation; similar complaints are heard among the Lingayats about the Sadar Lingayats (Thimmaiah 1993:157). In Bihar too, the division between the Kurmis and the Yadavs which surfaced recently, and the decision of the Atyant Pichhra Varg Mahasangh (Most Backward Classes Association) in 1992 to demand 15 per cent reservation within the 27 per cent reservation for OBCs recommended by the Mandal Commission, indicate a trend towards segmentation within the OBC category. Further, despite the fact that OBCs and SCs and STs have formed a political alliance in support of the Mandal Commission, several reports of violent skirmishes in rural North India between the OBCs and the SCs provide evidence of fission. Such fission should be

considered along with the tendency for castes to integrate at higher levels. Thus in the recently held Kurmi 'maha rally' in Patna,[11] the Kurmis sought to identify themselves with the Kunbis (Patidars) of Gujarat and the Kanbi-Marathas of Maharashtra. Thus, a new caste order with segmentation operating in the secular realm level is being reconstructed by political processes generated by the phenomenon of bourgeoisification and backward class politics.

Backward class politics has its economic dimension as well. The philosophy of reservation entails that the government is the dominant employer, and that considerations of 'equity' gain priority over matters of efficiency. Hence, the hard-won battle for backward class reservation would prove meaningless if the government retreats from the commanding heights of the economy, and if it sheds many of its regulatory and control functions. Such steps would not only reduce the number of posts in the government but also diminish the authority vested in government jobs. Hence there is a close affinity between the Mandal ideology and the socialist ideology that informed India's development programmes till recently. It is therefore not surprising that the proponents of 'Mandalization' initially opposed liberalization of the economy.

Paradoxical as it may seem, bourgeoisification also supports economic liberalization. Members of the urban middle class are now getting attracted to liberalization because it promises high living standards enjoyed by people in South Korea, Taiwan and other countries which are held up as successful models of liberalization. Bourgeoisification, by extending and deepening the market for consumer goods, supports the liberalization agenda. S. L. Rao, an economist, recounts the instance of a small entrepreneur who captured a sizeable portion of the market of a multinational corporation by producing a low cost detergent which he could sell at a price affordable to the lower middle class consumers. He also refers to the spectacular success achieved by a manufacturer of shampoo by marketing his product in small satchels at affordable prices.[12] Thus the immense market potential implied in the middle class culture and the bourgeoisification process has strengthened pressures towards liberalization from both external and internal sources.

An additional impetus has been the recent decision of the government to reserve jobs in the civil services for the backward classes. This reduces job opportunities, especially for the upper castes, which in turn makes liberalization attractive to them. The rapid growth of the private sector that liberalization entails throws open numerous economic opportunities and jobs especially for the professionals who even today hail substantially from the upper castes.

Economic liberalization in the long run is likely to weaken the hold of caste over the economy. The free play of market forces implied in liberalization is likely to dilute the importance of caste in economic calculations. As economic controls are lifted, the privileges enjoyed by groups because of their social connections are likely to disappear. In the severe competition that is entailed, only entrepreneurs who are innovative enough to reduce costs and increase productivity are likely to survive, not those who are capable of manipulating caste and kinship networks. Further, as liberalization entails free flow of information as well as resources, caste monopolies that operate in the various interstices of the economy will become ineffective. Since enhanced competition is likely to encourage professional management of firms to ensure enhanced productivity and profit, criteria stressing efficiency and skill will prove to be more important in recruitment than the caste of the worker and his loyalty to the firm. As competition opens up and productivity increases all round, the economic growth rate is likely to get accelerated, which in turn would multiply job opportunities to such an extent that workers do not have to ply their caste background to get jobs. Hence in the long run liberalization has the potential of 'annihilating caste' and abolishing poverty, goals which are shared by many socialist thinkers.

The long run, however, is shaped by short-term trends. In the short term, liberalization may adversely affect the poor and the underprivileged because market forces are friendly to those who are endowed with skills and resources. And those who lack the 'endowments' cannot participate in the market. Hence it is to be expected that there will be considerable resistance to liberalization, especially from the left forces and from the supporters of the backward class movement. As of now, the supporters of liberalization

are members of the upper castes and the professionally oriented capitalist class in urban areas and dominant peasant castes in rural areas. Thus, it is clear that politics of caste is spilling over to the realm of political economy. It is likely that the dynamics of the political economy of caste will determine not only the future of caste but also the capacity of India's economy to transcend the constraints of the Hindu rate of growth. If the policy of liberalization and with it the possibility of rapid economic development is thwarted, it will mainly be because of the backlash produced by the caste system.

The argument of this paper is similar to Deepak Lal's (1988) analysis of 'Hindu equilibrium'. Approaching the problem as an economist he holds that the bureaucratic mode of allocation implied in India's socialist regime has succeeded in perpetuating 'patron-client traditional ties which have maintained Hindu equilibrium for millennia' (1988:293). He supports liberalization because the market economy replaces contract for custom and 'enables diverse interest groups which must necessarily be present in a pluralistic sub-continental polity to coexist, and put their energies to productive uses rather than use those energies for "rent seeking" and attempted hijacking of the levers of the State power' (*ibid.*:293). The focus on patron-client relations, however, is not entirely valid because numerous sociological studies have brought out that even when patron-client relations persist, contractual aspects are creeping into these relations (Mukherji 1991). Moreover, there is evidence that patron-client relations have broken down under the weight of 'capitalist' development in some of the more developed pockets of the country. Jan Breman who intensively studied the *hali* system of Gujarat, has documented in detail its breakdown and the emergence of an exploitative system in which labourers are not merely 'commoditized' but are treated as 'worse than dogs' (1990, 1993). While patron-client relations are declining, caste persists as the social infrastructure of the Indian economy. I have in this paper attempted to examine the reasons for its persistence. I have also attempted to show that the politics of caste has conspired with the socialist strategy

of development to account for what Deepak Lal terms the 'Hindu equilibrium'.

To assess the social consequences of the 'Hindu rate of growth', it is useful to consider some attempts to conceptualize social change in India. Stern (1993:2-3) adopts Barrington Moore's (Jr) concept of 'bourgeois revolution' which entails development of capitalism and parliamentary democracy to describe social change. He is also of the view that the ongoing 'bourgeois revolution' in India is mainly the handiwork of the middle class. I consider that the term 'bourgeois revolution' to characterize changes that are occurring in India is singularly appropriate but *not* for the reasons given by Barrington Moore. This is because India's development till 1991 cannot be characterized as an instance of capitalist development. On the contrary, India's development was explicity patterned by the socialist ideology. If the term is still appropriate it is because the liberalizing trends that have been initiated, have set in motion trends of capitalist development which are yet to break free from the stranglehold of the ideologies of caste and socialism on the economy.

Gail Omvedt (1994) has recently adopted 'a historical-materialist analysis' to grasp some of the trends of social change that have been discussed in this paper. Omvedt views the caste structure in terms of the divide between the Brahmin and upper castes on the one hand, and the peasant castes and Dalits on the other. She looks upon the backward class movement as an expression of class conflict. After all, the state represents the major axis of power in peasant societies, and the Brahmins and upper castes, by entrenching themselves in the state system, have exercised power over the peasant castes and Dalits. Hence, according to Omvedt the backward class movement is essentially a struggle for power on the part of the peasant castes and the Dalits. She also believes that this movement is progressive in the sense that it aims at a structural change — a change to an advanced system. Omvedt draws upon the anti-caste ideology of the backward caste movement to support her thesis. In this sense, the backward class movement heralds a proletarian revolution rather than a 'bourgeois revolution'.

Viewed from Omvedt's perspective, the attempt made in this paper

to view the backward class movement as a product of 'bourgeoisification' may appear as an attempt at trivializing the objectives of an essentially radical movement. But bourgeoisification is a cultural expression of the backward class movement. It expresses the acceptance of certain features of middle class lifestyle as well as a debunking and rejection of one of the basic middle class values namely, achievement. But though the backward class movement has supported the socialist strategy of development, it is pointed out here that far from being anti-caste, the movement has only succeeded in reinventing the caste system. Hence, I do not share Omvedt's assessment of the backward class movement as a progressive movement.

According to the view presented here, liberalization, and not the backward class movement, represents the march towards a 'bourgeois revolution' which presents the only possibility of 'annihilating caste' as Ambedkar envisaged. The backward class movement, since it strengthens caste identities and keeps economic growth in the thrall of caste, ought to be regarded as a manifestation of bourgeoisification, *Indian style*. Hence, despite its ideological underpinnings, the backward class movement does not represent a 'revolution'.

It is now possible to assess the Weberian view of caste society. Although there is evidence of the caste system constraining economic growth, which supports Weber, this paper also notes that the country today stands at the crossroads of development. While the familiar path of socialist development leads to a reaffirmation of the Weberian thesis, the path of liberalization opens up a genuine possibility of breaking the stranglehold of caste over the economy. The final choice of the path of development, however, will be the outcome of a complex set of political forces that are at work at the global as well as at the national levels.

Notes

1. See also Pandey (1990:94-95). Pandey refers to caste distinction among Muslim Julahas such as the Koli Julahas, Chamar Julahas, Mochi Julahas, and even the Parsotiya Julahas who were reputedly Hindu. Ghurye (1961:35)

also notes that the '*Sali* weaving caste of Maratha country, has Ahir, Marathas and Chambhar sub-castes'.

2. Jayaram (1977) contends that higher education acts as a 'status stabilizer' which implies that Brahmins and upper castes through their access to higher education have entered prestigious professions. Another study in the sociology of education in India concludes that 'caste status continues to be indicative of occupational and economic status' (Velaskar 1990:133).
3. In Tamil Nadu the reservation system has considered sub-caste divisions to identify the backward classes. But since one branch of a sub-caste is classified as backward while its other branch is not, it has made for misuse of the reservation policy.
4. Holmstrom (1976) had in an earlier research study encountered a milder, Karnataka version of this 'sons of the soil' movement in Bangalore.
5. For details on the Bharatiya Kisan Union see Lindberg (1992).
6. Thimmaiah (1993) holds that the Lingayats and the Okkaligas have dominated the farmers' movement in Karnataka because they felt frustrated at being sidelined by the policies of Devraj Urs, the former Chief Minister of Karnataka.
7. Chakrabarty's (1989) study points out that most of the jute workers in West Bengal's jute mills were low caste migrants from Bihar. In Bombay, Mahars constituted about 10 per cent of the workforce. They were barred from the weaving departments because spittle had to be used to join broken threads, and their low caste status created pollution problems for the other workers (Omvedt 1994).
8. Joshi (1981) in her study of textile labour in Kanpur, Newman (1981) in his study of the workforce in Bombay textile mills, and Chakrabarty (1989) in his work on the jute mills of Calcutta, bring out the critical role played by the jobber in recruitment, maintenance of work discipline, and settling disputes between workers and the management.
9. This decision to accept and implement the report of the Mandal Commission is the culmination of populist politics that had its origins in the year 1971 when Indira Gandhi adopted the slogan of 'garibi hatao' to lead her faction of the Congress party to power. The more the goal of equity was subverted by inefficiency of the government and the public sector on the one hand, and the nexus of corruption that developed between business and politics on the other, the more the government resorted to populist, distributive policies in order to win elections in the name of promoting equity and socialism. This trend continued in the 1980s as well, and it should be noted in this connection that the Janata Dal government came to power in the centre by declaring that it would annul the farmers' loans to the tune of Rs 10,000 per capita, as one of its election promises (for more details see Panini 1995:41–42).
10. It was no accident that students (mostly from the upper castes) in medical colleges and engineering colleges were actively involved in the anti-Mandal

agitations. After all, they stood to lose much from the acceptance of the Mandal Commission Report.

11. See a report by Das in *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 16 February 1994.
12. See an interview with S.L. Rao in *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 3 October 1993.

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CASTE AND HINDUISM: CHANGING PROTEAN RELATIONSHIP

N. Jayaram

From the sociological vantage point, two major socio-political developments in the recent past seem to warrant a review of the interface between the caste system and Hinduism. These developments are the abrupt decision of the National Front government in August 1990 to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in regard to the reservation of jobs in favour of the backward castes, and the launching of the project by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in November 1989 to build a temple at a disputed site in Ayodhya claimed to be the birthplace of Rama. 'Mandalism', as the events following the former are dubbed, is alleged to be a divisive force, reinforcing caste-consciousness among people and escalating casteism.[1] The 'Babri Masjid-Ramajanmabhumi issue', as the confrontation emerging out of the latter is designated, is claimed to be a unifying force, dissipating caste-consciousness and casteism, and bringing together Hindus all over the country and even abroad.[2] Keeping such allegations and claims in the background, this paper attempts to examine the changes in the protean relationship between the caste system and Hinduism in contemporary times..

Caste System: Persistence and Change

It has often been assumed by social scientists working in or on India that the process of modernization set in motion by the colonial regime and pursued by the indigenous bourgeoisie in the post-Independence era will gradually dissolve the caste system and the collectivist ethos, and replace it with a class system and an individualist ethos. This assumption had its roots in the theories of socio-economic change, Marxist as well as Weberian, which had evolved in the context of industrialization and the development of capitalism in western Europe. Anthropological and sociological studies on the caste system in India undertaken in the course of the last four decades have, however, revealed this assumption to be untenable, and have even exposed the naïve socio-centric judgements emerging from it. Rather, these studies seem to emphasize that modernization does not *ipso facto* tear apart the basic fabric of the caste system.

At the same time, it cannot be contended that the caste system has not changed at all. It can hardly be gainsaid that even from the time when written accounts of its practice are available, and certainly from the time of the colonial documentation of the phenomenon, caste has undergone considerable change. In any case, it is nowhere practised as rigidly as it was prescribed in the ancient Hindu law texts. What is important to note, however, is that the caste system has been the most flexible of the primordial institutional arrangements anywhere in the world, and it has shown an extraordinary capacity to adapt itself to a variety of changing, and often apparently contradictory, socio-economic conditions.

Analytical Conundrum

The persistence of the caste system as a socio-historical reality over the last two thousand years or so, and the changes it has undergone or has been undergoing in the last half century are not easy to grapple with, and are even more difficult to explain. The reasons for this are many and we shall briefly touch upon some.

At the very outset it has to be conceded that the concept of caste is itself problematic. Castes could be viewed either as being functionally interrelated in a *system* contributing to the vertical integration of a rigidly stratified society, or as autonomous *groups* serving common purposes and striving for common ends. Viewed as the former, caste constitutes a *structural principle* of society, and viewed as the latter, it acts as a *dynamic force* in interest articulation, collective mobilization, and social movement. While changes in the institution of caste can be comprehended fairly easily from either of these analytical perspectives, the relationship between the realities subsumed by them is complex and eludes easy analytical grasp.

This is further complicated by the fact that in its operation the caste system is a multidimensional phenomenon. Its most visible and therefore most widely recognized dimension has been the rigid socio-economic inequalities determined on the basis of birth, and the consequent inhumanity and injustice. But it has other significant dimensions: it constitutes a cultural context, provides an identity marker, facilitates reference group behaviour, and regulates marriage and kinship. These dimensions have not all changed uniformly, and there are also inter-regional differences in the extent and nature of their change.

Methodologically also there are problems in dealing with the changes in the caste system. One can speak of the caste system in macro or all-India terms (as is being done in this paper), or in micro or localized terms. The focus of the two being different, there can hardly be a correspondence between them; and both could justifiably claim to be making valid though often contradictory observations. Moreover, the position of caste as an explanatory variable, i.e., independent, intervening, and dependent, is not the same in different analyses, thereby precluding any categorical assertion or deterministic tendency. No wonder, it is difficult to find any account of the changing caste system without a strong dose of qualifications.

If the foregoing clarifications caution us to be circumspect in generalizing about such a hoary and complex phenomenon as caste, its juxtaposition with Hinduism would make such a caution even

more cardinal. This is because, unlike other world religions, Hinduism does not have 'a historically attested teacher or prophet, a sacred book, a geographically identifiable location for its beginnings, an ecclesiastical infrastructure and the conversion of large numbers of people to the religion' (Thapar 1991:159).[3] Rather, it has been 'a complex collection of philosophies' (Kolenda 1978:112), 'a loose confederation of innumerable cults' (Srinivas 1989:58), and 'an atmosphere, a structure of feeling, which governs the different sects and lifts them to higher levels' (Gopal 1991:14). A remarkable feature of Hinduism, which is particularly noteworthy in this context, has been its open-endedness, which is reflected in its extraordinary capacity to absorb and adopt local cultural beliefs and practices. And, in this process, the people concerned have been sorted and arranged in the caste hierarchy.

The Need for a Model

In view of its analytical and explanatory complexity, the changing caste system has been a theme for competing theoretical formulations and model-building. A critical review of such formulations and models is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to state here that while each one of the models or theories has some valid insights to offer, none of them can claim to provide an exhaustive and incontrovertible account of the structure and dynamics of the caste system in contemporary India.

Nevertheless, to understand the constancies and the adaptive changes in the caste system one has perforce to utilize a general analytical model. In view of its explanatory breadth in general, and its thematic appropriateness in particular, this paper is cast in the mould of Kolenda's (1978:8 and 9) model. This model views castes as largescale endogamous descent-groups (jatis), 'structured by a unilineal principle, composed of a hierarchy of increasingly inclusive segments.' When castes are integrated into 'a traditional local or regional system of interdependence and interchange with other groups,' we may speak of a caste *system*. These groups may or may

not have a distinctive subculture.

The explanatory thrust of Kolenda's (1978:151, 154-5 and Preface) model may be briefly stated as follows: The traditional caste system consisted of a set of occupationally specialized castes 'integrated into local hierarchical ritualized politico-economic systems of cooperation and interdependence'. This 'cooperative caste system' and 'the hierarchical organic solidarity' has been disappearing due to a variety of economic and political factors. In its place a new system of competitive solidarity has been emerging as 'fused combinations of castes compete with one another.' Thus, 'despite the gradual demise of the occupational aspect of the caste system (a demise now taking place at a more rapid tempo), the solidarity of the jati is intact.'

Model and Reality

It must be pointed out, however, that caste as a system has existed only locally, i.e., in a single village or a few linked villages. The jajmani system, as it has existed in several parts of India and has been declining steadily, is an apt illustration of this (see Kolenda 1978: 37-61). But castes in a locality may correspond to the broader category of varnas. Since the varnas function as a pan-Indian scheme, we can speak of an all-India caste system.

The decline of caste as a system should theoretically have resulted in castes becoming mere social categories encompassing descent-groups, whose boundaries across local areas would have at best been only notional, and that too only in kinship terms. But the 'politics of scarcity' and the exigencies of democratic politics have made the people belonging to these categories more and more caste-conscious and given currency to the idea of caste unity. The Backward Classes Movement and 'Mandalism' have obviously abetted caste-consciousness, caste mobilization and caste aggrandizement.

It is true that in many parts of the country, especially in the urban areas and among the present generation of youth in the rural areas, such conventional markers of caste as dress, deportment, names

and other diacritical marks are becoming less and less useful in the identification of caste. It is even possible for individuals to temporarily pass themselves off as members of a caste other than their own. But the constraints of endogamy, and the need for the participation of kinsfolk on ceremonial occasions, renders the possibility of a permanent masquerade extremely difficult.

The operational logic of castes as interest groups has made for selective sensitization of individuals to their caste identity. That is, individuals proclaim or withhold their caste identity depending upon circumstances. And, at times the caste identity may be consciously or unconsciously relegated to the background when a more general identity tag assumes strategic significance. One such tag which has assumed significance in the recent past has been that of being a Hindu. This puts the discussion on castes, caste system and Hinduism in perspective.

The Caste System - Hinduism Interface

It is well-known that traditionally the ideology justifying the caste system came from such Hindu scriptures and law books as the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Dharmashastra*. Both the cognitive categories of jatis (large-scale endogamous descent groups) and varnas (ranked classification of jatis) on the one hand, and the associated concepts of jatidharma and varnadharma (the religiously-ordained duties for the jati and varna members) on the other, were defined and interpreted in terms of the theological doctrines of Hinduism. So much so that Hinduism and the caste system came to be regarded as inextricably intertwined. It is because of this that Dr B.R. Ambedkar advocated quitting Hinduism as a prerequisite for the emancipation of the scheduled castes from the inhuman clutches of the caste system.

Curiously enough, instead of the caste system deriving operational justification from Hindu theology any more it is Hinduism which seems to be deriving functional support from the caste system.[4] As an institution, caste operationalizes several concepts and ideas axial to Hinduism such as purity-impurity (pollution), dharma (duty),

karma (action), rebirth, moksha (release from rebirth), samsara (mundane existence), hierarchy, immutable division of labour, etc. and thereby provides the connecting thread to the integration of 'Hindu culture'. The logic underlying 'Sanskritization', as will be discussed later, while structurally endorsing the caste system, contributes to the dynamic integration of Hinduism.

The significance of different caste groups vis-à-vis Hinduism has been undergoing a change. In the past the Brahmins were the sole custodians of Hinduism, while the Kshatriyas were the patrons and protectors of this faith. These caste groups were the earliest to have been exposed to the process of modernization set in motion by the colonial regime, and its first beneficiaries. While these caste groups have not totally lost their importance to Hinduism, neither can they claim any longer to be its exclusive custodians and patrons, nor are they its chief defenders any more. In the course of the last five decades the dominant agricultural and merchant castes as well as the lower castes, not excluding the scheduled castes (who were earlier outside the pale of the varna scheme), have taken considerable interest in the cultic and congregational, if not also in the doctrinal, aspects of Hinduism. In fact, the commitment of these groups to popular Hinduism borders on being almost a conditioned behaviour.

The growing religiosity of the non-'twice-born' caste groups, and the resulting growth in the popularity and the strength of Hinduism, is explained by two sets of factors. Srinivas (1989:70) has drawn attention to the fact that nationalism in India has 'expressed itself predominantly in a Hindu idiom' and this fact was accentuated after the partition of the country by a section of the Muslim leadership demanding recognition on religious grounds. The expression of Hindu symbolism in any political situation is all too common, and no political party can ignore the blessings of the religious leaders and mathadhipatis (monastic heads). The exhibition of pictures and idols of the Hindu pantheon, and their worship in government offices, state transport buses, and universities are seldom protested in secular India!

More important, however, have been the processes of the modernization of traditional Hindu rituals, and the democratization

of Hinduism. The mass media, such as the radio, television and cinema, have facilitated this process in no small measure. The lower castes now have close contact with the 'great tradition' of Hinduism. Not only have the restrictions on temple entry been removed, but there are also a few cases of the members of scheduled castes being appointed as pujaris in government-controlled temples. The growing appeal of certain new devotional traditions, such as the Aiyyappa cult, the Ganapati utsava, etc., or the invigoration of such old traditions as that of Ramlila, Devipuja, or local cults, as also the growing culture of pilgrimage, certainly lies in their caste neutrality. Disproportionately though, these traditions, cults and pilgrimages attract people from across the casteboard.

As Srinivas (1989:21-22) has observed, many of the Hindu calendrical festivals are celebrated now with far more pomp and pageantry than before. 'Vedic sacrifices (yajnas and yagas) are occasionally performed with great ostentation and with the enthusiastic support of the people.' While 'the quantum of ritual performed under domestic auspices has probably gone down . . . ritual performed outside the home, in the neighbourhood, temple, monastery and factory, school or other work place, seems to have increased.'

As noted earlier, Hinduism is not a monolithic or unitary religion. In the absence of an extant ecclesiastical order holding its adherents in an ambit without circumference, a shared popular religious culture acquires critical importance.

In evolving and spreading such a culture the great Hindu epics, namely the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and also the *Bhagavata Purana*, have played a crucial role. They have been at the base of literature in all Indian languages, both in written and oral traditions, and have strongly influenced art and entertainment. It is hardly surprising that the efforts at revival and promotion of Hinduism by such organizations as the VHP revolve around the symbols and episodes which are a part of this popular religious culture. The emergence of a self-conscious assertion of Hinduism and Hindu identity and interests, through mobilization cutting across caste lines, is only an expected political extension of this phenomenon.

Sanskritization and Modernization

The interface between the caste system and Hinduism has for long been mediated by a process subsumed under the concept of Sanskritization propounded and refined by Srinivas. It is defined by him as:

> . . . the process by which a low caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (dwija) caste.[5] The Sanskritization of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the caste hierarchy. It normally presupposes either an improvement in the economic or political position of the group concerned or a higher group self-consciousness resulting from the contact with a source of the 'Great Tradition' of Hinduism such as a pilgrim centre or a monastery or a proselytizing sect (Srinivas 1989:56-57).

No doubt the concept of Sanskritization can be and has been contested on empirical as well as theoretical grounds. Nevertheless, the general significance of the logic of Sanskritization as a cultural process for both the caste system and Hinduism can hardly be denied. On the one hand, Sanskritization has played what Srinivas calls, a 'cohesive role' vis-à-vis Hinduism. And, on the other hand, it has emphasized the open-ended nature of Hinduism, and highlighted the 'tremendously flexible' dimension of the 'tremendously persistent' caste system (Moore 1973:340).

As a cultural process, Sanskritization is a pan-Indian phenomenon, and it has even affected non-Hindu groups and communities which have come into contact with Hindus and Hinduism. Sociologists have well documented the process of incorporation of non-Hindu groups and communities into the Hindu fold, and assignment to them of (generally, though not invariably, the lowest) status in the caste hierarchy of the local social structure. To cite but one example, Breman (1974) has shown how in two villages of southern Gujarat

a tribal group called Dublas, working for the land-controlling Anavil Brahmins, have gradually become an 'Untouchable' caste.

This phenomenon is, as Moore (1973:340) puts it, that of 'a huge mass of locally coordinated social cells that tolerate novelty by generating another cell.' As far as the group or tribe is concerned, 'integration into a ranked series of strata was the price' to be paid 'in order to be settled in an agricultural village' (Kolenda 1978:36). The absorption of new groups into the local social structure has no doubt often resulted in confusion about the nomenclature and identity of a particular group in official and sociological parlance.

Be that as it may, what is important to note is the flexibility and variations in the degree of commitment to orthodox values by various castes and castes-in-the-making permitted by Hinduism, and its tolerance of their subcultures. This is what accounts for the survival of Hinduism even in the face of its nebulous complexity.[6] It may not be out of place to mention here that the Bhakti movement, which had as its basis socio-religious dissent and a pronouncedly anti-caste stance, was itself absorbed by Hinduism (see Jones 1989).

The flexible dimension of the caste system in the background of the open-endedness of Hinduism is reflected in the claims to higher caste status by the lower castes following their Sanskritization. Depending upon whether the Brahmin, Kshatriya or Vaisya varna is emulated by the lower castes, and claim to which varna status is made by them, there are the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya models of Sanskritization. The former two are more widespread, the Brahmin model more in the south and the Kshatriya model more in the north and west. The Vaisya model is confined to regions where the merchant castes are wealthy and enjoy greater social status (see Srinivas 1989:81).

Sanskritization can operate either at the individual level or at the collective level. Also, not all segments of a caste can successfully Sanskritize its customs. This, according to Kolenda (1978:101-02), results in the proliferation of jatis, with the segment which has successfully Sanskritized, 'pulling rank' on the segment which has not, refusing to give daughters in marriage to the latter. Such 'proliferation in jatis', and the consequent enlargement of and

competition for ranks may be, according to her, 'a feature of stability in the Indian caste system.'

The 'pulling of rank' is not, however, confined to segments within a caste. In fact, in its attempt to improve its status, an upwardly mobile caste may also try to 'pull rank' on the caste next high in rank. Thus, Kolenda (1978:100) found that:

> the Sweepers of Khalapur were trying to prohibit their members from taking food at weddings of the Leather-workers, the caste next highest to them in rank in Khalapur. Some of the Sweepers' leaders also talked about refusing to serve Laundrymen, who were of even higher rank and in the Shudra category, as a challenge to the relative rank ordering of the Sweepers and Laundrymen.

Unlike in the past, there is no institutionalized mechanism for arbitrating the claims for status of caste groups, or of segments within a caste group. And such claims cannot therefore be sustained officially. Even so, castes which engage themselves in Sanskritization seek the endorsement of public opinion for the improvement of their status in the local caste hierarchy. However, the crystallization of public opinion in favour of a Sanskritized caste is a slow and tenuous process, and is not likely to be reinforced if the caste concerned does not simultaneously improve its economic status and political clout.

Attempts at mobility in the caste system through conquest or by serving the ruling class have been known to take place in pre-British times (see Rowe 1968, Stein 1968, and Marriott 1968). But it was only after the colonial conquest that such attempts sought the official stamp of approval. During the census enumerations carried out by the British, hundreds of castes tried to register themselves as members of the higher varnas. 'One Census official for Bengal received enough petitions to weigh 120 pounds from jatis which wanted to have varna titles or wanted to take the name of a higher-ranking jati' (Kolenda 1978:99).

Paradoxically enough, there now seems to be a competition among caste groups to be designated as 'backward'. The innumerable

committees and commissions charged with the investigation of the problem of 'backwardness' have been dismayed at the large number of petitions and deputations proclaiming 'backwardness' in order to become eligible for the concessions and benefits of protective discrimination. Knowing full well the political pressure potential of these caste groups, the governments have liberally obliged them.

Efforts at status-climbing via Sanskritization on the part of some lower castes, and the striving for the backward tag among the non-'twice-born' castes in general are contradictory but real phenomena. The former is meaningful at the level of the local social structure, and in the religious and cultural spheres. The latter, in conjunction with the mobilization of castes, is significant in relation to the scarce education and job opportunities, and in the competition for political power. In either case, they endorse the primacy of caste, if not necessarily as a system, and strengthen Hinduism.

'Is Sanskritization on the wane?' This, according to Srinivas (1989:21), is 'a very difficult question to answer'. Even so, it cannot be denied that the process of modernization has reduced the tempo of Sanskritization and somewhat muted its significance. But the process of modernization has not uniformly spread among all castes or among the different segments of a given caste. Since modernization is more widespread at the individual level than Sanskritization, individuals often ambiguously shuttle back and forth between caste-related values and modern values.

Complicating the foregoing scenario is the internal stratification of castes. The unequal spread of education, and thereby access to modern professions and high status occupations, has sharpened the status hierarchy within castes. Combined with differential modernization among caste segments or members, the internal stratification of castes acts as an insurance against the total destruction of the caste system. Under such circumstances, efforts to mobilize people on caste lines alone is difficult, and to sustain such mobilization is even more so. Such efforts only endorse the institution of caste and aggravate casteism.

Caste: Pollution and Transaction

Analysing the changes in the caste system in the face of modernization, one can hardly escape reflecting on 'the opposition of the pure and the impure'. In his classic exposition, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Dumont (1970:33-64) has argued that this binary opposition is the ideological principle and the essence of the caste system. It is not necessary to go into the fundamentals of the as yet inconclusive debate on his contention to observe that the notion of what constitutes purity and pollution has been spatio-temporally relative. Furthermore, the preoccupation with this ideological principle has resulted in sidelining the crucial transactional element in the caste system.

According to Marriott (1976), who has highlighted the highly transactional nature of society in India, in the caste system the giver occupies a higher position than the receiver, and the served is superior to the server. The parallelism between the purity-impurity and giver-receiver dichotomies cannot be taken for granted. To the extent that such a parallel exists, the caste system would be rigid. But considering the changes that society in India has been undergoing, it would seem to be an empirical possibility that the caste system may persist with the transactional element even if the pollution element disappears. Incidentally, the idea and practice of pollution have been most seriously altered by the legal abolition of all forms of untouchability. And, Western ideas and the exigencies of modern living have been certainly eroding the concept of pollution.

Thus, one can argue that castes and the caste system can survive the purity-impurity ideology, and the institution of caste can survive even Hinduism. The existence of caste among Christians and Muslims in India is well known. Even in Veerasaivism (whose adherents in Karnataka are known as Lingayats), a sect which was explicitly anti-caste at the time of its founding, an entire set of castes can now be found completing a system. Dumont himself recognized this. But, in view of his undue emphasis on the ideology of purity-impurity, he naïvely explained the presence of the institution of caste among non-Hindus as due to 'the proximity of the Hindu

environment, which predominates both generally and regionally' (Dumont 1970:210).

All the same, it is certain that the people belonging to non-Hindu religions in India, who were all invariably converts to those religions originally, could hardly escape the caste system as 'a lived in social order' as none of the converting religions 'offered or instituted a new alternative social order' to displace it (Kolenda 1978:117 and 185). It is hardly surprising that proselytism as a strategy for emancipation of the depressed castes has been a failure (see Jayaram 1991).

Caste, Economy and Politics

Changes in the institution of caste cannot be fully comprehended in isolation from the changes in economy and politics, especially since Independence. A detailed analysis of the nexus between caste on the one hand and the economy and politics on the other is beyond the scope of this paper. Only a brief exposition of the theme can be attempted here, if only to complete the overall argument of this paper. Briefly stated, changes in caste as a system are closely related to the changes in the economic sphere, while the transformation of castes as interest groups is intrinsically related to the introduction and spread of democratic politics.

At the outset it is necessary to recognize the class basis of caste groups in order to understand the nature of change that caste as a system has been undergoing. Conjunction of caste and class statuses is no more a sociological axiom. The decline of the jajmani system and the commercialization of agriculture, the implementation of land reforms, the release from bondage of agrestic serfs, and the consequent changes in agrarian relations; and the rise of the land-owning 'upper Shudra' caste groups, have all profoundly altered the economic bearing of the caste system. This has often been accompanied by the spread of caste violence (see Frankel and Rao 1989). There are, however, regional variations in all this.

The introduction of democracy, which has been effective in India

since Independence, while dismantling the traditional authority structure, at least theoretically, has contributed to the growth and consolidation of castes as interest groups. In view of the fragmentation and factionalism within caste groups, and alignments and realignments among them, political parties no doubt cut across caste groups. But, because of the compulsions of electoral politics, no party can ignore the caste factor except at its own peril. At every stage in politics, the leaders of political parties have to engage in 'caste-rope walking'. The importance of caste increases as we go down the political hierarchy from the parliamentary constituency to the village panchayat. Religious and sectarian leaders and the mathadhipatis (monastic heads) also play a crucial, though covert, role in the mobilization of the caste factor for political purposes.

Considering the political potential of mobilization on caste lines, caste associations have come to thrive. It is true that caste associations first emerged as early as in the nineteenth century. But in their numbers, spread, organization, resources and power, contemporary caste associations are certainly distinct from their humbler counterparts of yesteryears. Today 'through the association the urban politically-literate élite (are) linked with the less literate villagers belonging to the same caste' (Kolenda 1978:121). This process has been facilitated by the spread of education and the development of the means of communication and transportation.

Whither Castes and Caste System?

The extent and nature of changes in the institution of caste are certainly different between the urban and rural areas. The decline of caste as a system is more perceptible in cities than in rural areas, whereas the growth of castes as articulated interest groups is more noticeable in urban areas. This should not be construed to mean that there is no semblance of a caste system in cities, and that the mobilization of people on caste lines is absent in villages. Rather, it only means that the systemic dimension of caste is expectedly less significant in cities than in villages, whereas the locus of caste

consciousness and caste mobilization at the broader level is to be found in the cities and towns rather than in the villages.

Notwithstanding the above variations in the nature and significance of change in the institution of caste, one question which still remains to be answered is about the future of this institution. This question has been raised and answered several times for over a century and a half now. The general thrust of the answers based on careful scrutiny of evidence seems to be categorical, and it is summarized succinctly by Gould (1988:167): 'It . . . appears very unlikely that so admirable an adaptive structure as caste is in any serious danger of ever disappearing completely.' Its religious basis may wane, its systemic rigour may weaken; but its social (kinship) basis will persist, and its group connotation will gain strength. As far as its interface with Hinduism is concerned, though Hinduism may lose meaning as a justificatory ideology for the hierarchy and inequalities of the system, its cultural crux will persist and crystallize. And, Hinduism will benefit more from the survival of caste than caste from Hinduism.

Notes

1. In his article, which is suggestively titled, ' Mandal Commission's Mischief' (*Indian Express*, Bangalore, 6 October 1990, p.8), Lt. Gen. Hridaya Kaul (Retd.) sums up this argument thus: The decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendations has 'with one stroke . . . sown the seeds of permanent caste conflict.'
2. On this issue, Hasan (1991:100) observes, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, backed by the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 'found both a cause and an opportunity to create a bond of fraternal unity among their divided and stratified constituency. In the Shilanyas ceremonies (they) found a unifying symbol and a cementing bond which had, for centuries, eluded Hindu reformers and preachers.'
3. According to Gopal (1991:14), though the term Hinduism had been 'used in the sense of religion in the fifteenth century,' it 'came into common usage only in the nineteenth century.'
4. In a different context Mason (1970:159) has observed that 'the institution of caste was a protection against Islam.' While Hindu princes were defeated, Hinduism 'retaliated by infecting, undermining, and subtly converting Islam.'

The secret and unobtrusive counter-attack of Hinduism against invading Islam was in 'the tightness of the inmarrying social group.' Caste survived conversion to Islam.

5. Elucidating this Mason (1970:152) writes, 'Part of a group will split off from the rest, renounce some degrading practice, and adopt some new privation that carries status; they will change perhaps from demanding a bride-price to giving a dowry — an immense step in the social scale; they will forswear the re-marriage of widows or turn vegetarian or renounce onions (as the Brahmans do) and will take a new name.' Referring to this process among the Jatavs (traditionally leather workers) of Agra city, Lynch (1969:218) has used the phrase 'elite emulation'. But here the term Sanskritization is preferable as it views this emulation in terms of the caste system in its interface with Hinduism.
6. It is important that even the legal definition of Hinduism has been neither a 'measure of religious belief' nor a 'description of social behaviour,' but only the designation of a 'civil status.' As Galanter (1989:119-20) notes: 'Heterodox practice, lack of belief, active support of non-Hindu religious groups, expulsion by a group within Hinduism — none of these removed one from the Hindu category, which included all who did not openly renounce it or explicitly accept a hostile religion. The individual could venture as far as he wished over any doctrinal or behavioural borders; the gates would not shut behind him if he did not explicitly adhere to another communion.'

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CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY RURAL INDIA

G. K. Karanth

Contemporary sociological and social anthropological understanding of Indian institutions such as caste, family and kinship suffer from at least one drawback. Until the Sixties and early Seventies there had been many village studies by both Indian and Western scholars. The reports of such intensive studies had led to a body of concepts, theories and a debate about the nature and direction of changes occurring in these institutions. However, village studies of this type went out of fashion, leaving behind a void in our understanding of continuities and discontinuities in these institutions. Such a void was a consequence of, among other factors, a shift in the interests of sociologists to newer areas, often in response to the trends set by some major works on Indian society (e.g., Oommen 1972 and 1978; Béteille 1974; Joshi 1974). In addition, some of

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Throughout this essay the use of terms 'lower' and 'higher' while referring to caste are made to reflect the people's views and not the author's.

these institutions like caste were seen to be losing academic importance. More often than not these institutions were treated as intervening 'sociocultural' variables in either facilitating or hindering the successful implementation of an economic programme (e.g., land reforms, rural development) or in the working of cooperatives, panchayati raj institutions and so on. Although these institutions were recognized for their role, the real focus was on the government-sponsored programmes of change and development.[1] A reason for such a shift in focus was the assumption that caste, family and kinship were undergoing considerable changes as a consequence of urbanization, industrialization, democratization, spread of education, etc. An important consequence of such a shift has been a decline of sociological interest in the institutions themselves. However, there is an urgent need to examine the impact of the various programmes of change and development on the institution of caste in rural India.

Any analysis of contemporary caste requires a minimum understanding of the institution as it was in the past. I shall take an oft-cited passage to refer to the features of caste. Caste is 'a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity, and generally, maximum commensality occurs within the caste' (Srinivas 1962:3).

The following features become evident from this definition. First, membership in a caste is by birth. Second, a caste is an endogamous unit. Third, members of each caste traditionally had an occupation or trade to pursue. Fourth, castes are graded in a local hierarchy. Fifth, notions of pollution and purity govern the nature and extent of the relationships between castes.

Although it may appear to be over-simplistic in approach, I shall take some of these features to discuss contemporary caste as an institution in rural India. At the end of the essay I make some observations on the validity of the concept of dominant caste in rural society, which concept has received, in my view, an academically rough and unrealistic treatment.

I

If there is one significant change in caste in rural and urban India today it is its growing dissociation with hereditary occupation. No longer can one deduce a person's caste by looking at his or her occupation. The carpenter in the village is no longer from the carpenter caste, nor is the blacksmith invariably from the blacksmith caste. The growing dissociation between caste and occupation in rural India is due to several factors, some of which I shall refer to presently. At the outset it is important to bear in mind that the factors associated with such a dissociation have not been at work in isolation. Several forces have been responsible for such a process and it is better to examine them separately for the purpose of achieving analytical clarity.

To begin with, mention may be made of two major institutions which lost their importance, which in turn affected the association between caste and occupation in contemporary rural India. The first is the institution of the caste panchayat or council which in the past functioned as a quasi-judicial institution. It governed and regulated both the internal and external relations of a caste. Each caste had a council, at the local or regional level, consisting of elders of the group who officiated as leaders. Such a council looked after issues like ensuring the proper conduct of members of a caste with respect to their hereditary rights and obligations. Ghurye (1969) gives a long list of offences dealt with by a caste panchayat: eating, drinking, or having similar dealings with a caste or sub-caste with which such social intercourse was forbidden; keeping as concubine a woman of another caste; refusal to fulfil a promise of marriage; refusing to send a wife to her husband when old enough; refusing to maintain a wife; non-payment of a debt; petty assaults; breaches of the customs of the trade peculiar to the caste; encroaching on another's clientele, and raising or lowering prices; killing a cow or any other forbidden animal; insulting a Brahmin and defying the customs of the caste regarding feasts, etc., during marriage and other ceremonies.

That caste panchayats regulated the conduct of people with regard to their occupational rights is evident from the above list. But after

independence and the passing of the Constitution of India (1950), caste panchayats were made legally redundant. [2] This in effect meant that the members of a given caste were free to choose the occupation they liked and caste exclusiveness of occupations was no longer tenable in law. In the past, encroachment into an occupation by members of another caste was resisted by the specialist castes through the caste panchayat and the local village panchayat. The Constitution deprived the panchayats of this power.

A second important cause for the caste-occupation dissociation was the decline of an institution which in the past enabled members of a caste to not only establish their claims to a livelihood but also to claim exclusive right to their hereditary occupation. This institution, the jajmani system, was known by different names in different parts of the subcontinent. Under this arrangement members of certain castes rendered their services or supplied goods to the village community, particularly the landowning dominant castes, in return for an annual wage paid in kind. The relationship between the specialist and the landowner was enduring over generations, and was part of a wider patron-client relationship. Each had a set of obligations and rights. Thus the service specialist had a right to demand work from the patron, be paid for it, (ideally) exclude competition from others, and so on. The specialist castes also had duties in the patron's household on ritual occasions such as weddings and funerals.

Although there is evidence of jajmani relations persisting despite the changes in the economy (e.g., Harris 1980; Good 1982; Karanth 1987), the growing body of literature suggests its decline. This is due to several social, economic and political reasons with which I shall not concern myself for the present. The decline of jajmani relationships has accelerated the process of dissociation of castes and traditional occupations, forcing the specialist castes to look to new avenues for earning a livelihood. Such dissociation was further accelerated by other factors such as industrialization, the spread of education, urbanization, and the emergence of new occupations. Industrialization not only attracted many of the displaced caste specialists (carpenters and blacksmiths, for instance) but also many

young men who would otherwise have continued to pursue traditional occupations. Industrialization also replaced several products which the village artisans were producing for the erstwhile patrons. Stainless steel vessels, metal pails, plastic wares, etc., replaced potter-made earthenware. Nor are raw materials available as they used to be in the past: gold for the goldsmith, bamboo for the basket-maker, wood for the carpenter, and earth for the potter. New administrative policies too have played their role in limiting access to raw materials for the village artisans e.g., use of forest resources, gold, etc. Thus both the produce and the services to maintain the new products required interaction with the market economy on a much larger scale than before. Rural economy based on caste specialization and the jajmani system could not meet the costs of new technology, thereby forcing the specialists from certain castes to take up new occupations.

In the context of the association between caste and traditional occupation, it is important to note that members of the upper and middle castes tend to move away from traditional occupations, especially when they are regarded as socially degrading and ritually defiling. In such cases the shift is to jobs in what may be regarded as the secular-economic order, even if they are less remunerative. Thus a man may give up the traditional occupation of sheep rearing, washing clothes, or being a barber, for a job as a clerk or even a peon or messenger in the government or in a private firm. From the point of view of the caste-based social order the shift would be regarded as upward social mobility although in the new occupation-based system of stratification the job is regarded as low. Employment in the government confers prestige on a villager regardless of the level of employment and income. Indeed, urban employment has become an important indicator of social status, and every village household would like to have one or more of its members employed in the urban sector.

But members of the lower castes, in particular the former 'Untouchables', find it difficult to move away from their traditional occupation. I may mention here that members of the Madiga or Holeya castes in rural Karnataka are still found to be engaged in the traditional occupations of village messenger (thoti) or scavenger. In

some states in southern India, hereditary village offices were abolished by law after Independence. But still a few very low castes are found performing their duties as they did in the past, inside or outside the network of jajmani relations. The role of the dominant castes is significant in this regard for often they are the chief beneficiaries of the services of the specialists. Members of dominant castes bring economic and other pressures on dependent castes to ensure continued master-servant or patron-client relationships. I am aware of quite a few instances where the former thotis continue to perform their duties simply because the dominant castes have informed them that a discontinuation of their services would result in the government taking back the land originally granted to them for the performance of such duties. Such lies were deliberately spread to ensure continued service and obedience from the former 'Untouchable' castes. The legal abolition of 'untouchability' and even the benefits of a policy of 'protective discrimination' have not succeeded in removing the economic dependence of the former 'Untouchable' castes on the members of the dominant castes. Indeed one of the results of the implementation of welfare measures for the weaker sections in rural areas has been to enhance their dependence on the leaders from dominant castes: government officials often depend on the latter for identifying beneficiaries from the weaker sections.

There is one more reason why the lower castes have not been able to dissociate themselves from their traditional occupations to the extent to which the upper castes have been able to. Taking up non-traditional occupations depends upon the availability of alternative opportunities and the extent to which different castes are able to make use of such opportunities. But this is where members of the very low castes are particularly disadvantaged.

II

The relative position of different castes in the local hierarchy is difficult to pinpoint particularly with respect to the middle range

castes. Each caste laid claim to a position which was frequently not conceded by the others. Further, over generations, some of the low castes had tried to Sanskritize their customs and lifestyle in order to improve their rank in the hierarchy, with varying degrees of success. Sanskritization continues to be an important and many-sided process of cultural and social change in rural areas. In naming children, names indicative of caste are now being given up in favour of Sanskritic names. Also, the names of the high gods and goddesses of Hinduism are added on to the worship of local deities. The influence of radio and television, and especially popular television serials like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* is considerable in this regard. The net effect has been to strengthen what may be called 'Sanskritic values'. The influence of the electronic media has often run counter to the spread of secular and modern values.

The politicization of the communal situation in the country has also contributed to strengthening religious fundamentalism, and consequently of Sanskritic values among Hindus.[3] This was confined in the past to urban areas, but in recent years has been spreading to rural areas as well. Organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad have attempted to draw support from different castes, and the lower castes have found in this an opportunity to further their Sanskritization goals. This movement towards Sanskritization among the rural Hindu castes has been fuelled by reports of communal tension and riots in different parts of the country.

However, the model for Sanskritization is no longer provided only by the Brahmins. Instead there is a growing tendency to have the non-Brahmin dominant castes as models, more because of their economic and social rather than their ritual status. It may be argued, however, that such a process need not necessarily be considered Sanskritization, since what is being emulated is only the culture of the higher castes. While that is true, it is also undeniable that the dominant castes have Sanskritized their lifestyles, and emulation of the dominant by the dependent, lower castes, results in the Sanskritization of the lower. An example will illustrate the point. In rural Karnataka, until recently, it was never the practice for members of lower castes to have a separate puja room in their homes. That

was a characteristic of the better off among the higher castes. But over the years members of dominant castes too have built brick and cement houses from increased agricultural income and from other sources. It is common for such new structures to have puja rooms and this tendency is now spreading to others. During the course of my fieldwork in Chitradurga and Bangalore districts in Karnataka, I came across buildings recently made by members of the lower castes, a few by members of the former 'Untouchable' castes, who had set apart a small area in the inner parts of the house to serve as a puja room. Images and representations of deities such as Rama, Venkateswara, Raghavendra Swamy or Manjunatha, or a godman like Sri Sai Baba, were kept in this room. Utensils and other articles necessary for worship were arranged before the representations as in a temple or in an upper caste household. Likewise, members of almost all castes now have a tulasi plant (*Ocimum sanctum*) in the front yard of the house, a custom formerly confined to the upper castes.

It is necessary to point out, however, that what appears as 'Sanskritization', the emulation of customs and rituals of higher castes, may nowadays have a different meaning. Emulation may really be defiance. Formerly, lower castes were forbidden from such emulation of higher castes and the leaders of dominant castes had the power to prevent it. But as mentioned earlier, law courts will now uphold the right of lower castes to adopt the customs and rituals of higher castes and the police will enforce the decisions of the courts. Lower castes nowadays celebrate publicly such festivals as Ganesh Chaturthi and Sathyanarayana puja. Further, a harikatha is often arranged to mark the eleventh day of mourning for a deceased member of the household, or on the occasion of a death anniversary. Sanskritization here becomes not only an attempt to claim higher status but also a demonstration of the new economic position of a lower caste household. Inviting relatives and wealthy friends who arrive in cars and scooters is a hallmark of such a demonstration.

Claiming higher status through Sanskritization is not the only process active in rural India. There is also acute competition among castes to claim 'backward' status, as that entitles them to the benefits

of protective discrimination (Srinivas 1989:20). Sometimes castes are 'accused' of being really 'forward', thus cutting into the benefits which only the really 'backward' are entitled to. Thus in Karnataka, the two dominant castes of Lingayats and Okkaligas are now bringing acute pressure on the powers-that-be to retain their claim to 'backwardness'. Even some sub-castes among Brahmins have claimed to be ritually (and therefore) socially backward. The situation may be summed up by saying that the same castes often claim to be 'high' in a traditional context and 'backward' in a 'modern' context. Both, in the last resort, represent efforts at moving up in the caste and class hierarchies.

Besides the pattern of change in inter-caste dynamics described above, there are two dimensions which need to be mentioned. First, secular factors are becoming increasingly important in the evaluation of caste status. But this does not mean that traditional criteria of caste ranking have become irrelevant. For instance, in South India, castes such as those of the shepherd, toddy-tapper and fisherman, which were regarded as low traditionally, have now access to political power and wealth. This is generally acknowledged by the people but it has not led to assigning the mobile castes a higher rank. Such upward mobility is resented by castes traditionally ranked higher.

Second, the post-Independence policies of protective discrimination, land reforms, and other welfare measures have not significantly changed the relative status of the very low castes. There is a widespread feeling that the benefits of protective discrimination policies have gone to the urban and more influential among the 'backward' castes. Indeed this has been a basic argument against continued reservation in education and employment. It is also frequently argued that there has been social mobility more for individuals than for groups. Such a process is conspicuously evident among the Scheduled Castes in rural India. Individual social mobility among them is invariably followed by, or subsequent to, their migration to urban areas. The benefits of such mobility is unlikely to percolate to the others in the caste, with the exception that the upwardly mobile individual may pull his close kin to the town. But the social conditions of those left behind in the village remain by and large the same.

While the upper castes tend to retain their rural base even after migration, very low castes find it difficult to do so for at least two reasons. First, the social and economic 'push' factors in the village do not undergo major changes. Second, the new and higher social status gained by them in the urban environment may not be conceded to them in their villages. Such a status incongruence encourages members of lower castes to gradually withdraw from the villages of their origin. Women also contribute to this process of withdrawal. Having enjoyed a relatively emancipated status in the city they are reluctant to return to the village. Educational, medical and employment facilities available in urban areas are also factors preventing a return to rural roots.

Attempts by the lower castes to carry over their urban status into their villages have resulted in inter-caste violence. Every year several incidents of such inter-caste violence are reported in the papers and discussed in state Legislative Assemblies. Such outbursts of violence generally involve mass killings, physical assault and rape, and the economic and social boycott of the upwardly mobile lower castes by the dominant castes. The Scheduled Castes have been a frequent target of such violence, notably in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. The dominant and other high castes not only resent the erosion of their power and prestige but are indignant at the benefits conferred on the Scheduled Castes through the policy of reservation in education and employment. As the various measures designed for their benefit become effective, traditional power relations between them and the higher castes, in particular the dominant castes, are thrown out of gear.

While the low castes have not been able to substantially improve their social status, those at the very top have not been able to retain their position. This is due largely to the erosion of their ritual importance and the simultaneous increase in the Sanskritization of the lower castes. Further, the upper castes still living in villages are those who were unable to be a part of the exodus to urban areas that took place in the wake of the land reforms during the 1950s and 1960s. At present they are small landowners who also practice their traditional calling. They are becoming increasingly dependent on

the economically and politically more powerful, but ritually inferior castes. It is widely speculated that the tiny bits of land owned by them will gradually be bought up by the dominant castes.

III

Ideas of purity and impurity expressed themselves in various ways in inter-caste relations. Higher castes were prohibited from accepting cooked food and drinking water from the lower, the latter were prohibited from coming into close physical contact with the former or entering the inner portions of the houses of the upper castes. Traditionally, the lower castes were denied the use of the streets where the high castes lived and in the case of the former 'Untouchables', the use of public wells and entry into high caste temples or eating places were forbidden. But significant changes are taking place in the areas mentioned above. In intensive research carried out in villages near Bangalore, some years ago, several members of the higher castes expressed their willingness to eat food cooked and served by the lower castes provided certain hygienic standards were met with (Karanth 1981). Such attitudinal changes were more pronounced among the younger people. Again, men were more willing than women to dine in lower caste houses. As could be expected, men exposed to urban life were less concerned with notions of purity and pollution than those without such exposure.

Many of the traditionally vegetarian castes have now begun to eat non-vegetarian food and consume alcoholic beverages.[4] The number of non-vegetarian restaurants and liquor shops are increasing in the bigger villages and small towns. Until recently, members of vegetarian castes felt some hesitation in visiting non-vegetarian restaurants but no longer. On the contrary, they seem to experience a sense of achievement in breaking traditional taboos. The steep increase in the price of meat in recent years is often attributed to the vegetarian castes' taking to meat-eating.

During my fieldwork in Rajapura I found several members of the former 'Untouchable' castes of Holeya and Madiga fetching liquor

for their dominant Okkaliga patrons. This was a significant change in so far as Holeyas and Madigas were traditionally not permitted to enter the houses of Okkaligas, and the consumption of liquor brought in by the former constituted an even more serious breach of the rules of purity and impurity. In other words, the taste for country liquor which several members of the dominant castes and other high castes have developed in recent years has resulted in further weakening the notions of purity and impurity. But what is interesting to note is that the high castes who have taken to drink do not like to be seen visiting local liquor shops. They resort to the services of their formerly 'Untouchable' clients.

These patterns of behaviour may be described as a manifestation of 'dual culture', that is, an adherence to traditional values in one context and modern and egalitarian ones in another (see Srinivas 1977). A dual culture with respect to caste norms on purity and pollution has come about as a result of urban exposure, education and the loss of caste's traditional authority over its members. It is thus not uncommon to find a rural upper caste person eating food in a restaurant in a city without any concern as to who serves the food or who cooked it and when. He may even take with him members of Scheduled Castes and dine with them at the same table. But back in the village both adhere to the traditional norms of segregation. A member of a lower or former 'Untouchable' caste may be entertained by an upper caste man in his urban residence but not in his village house. The governing principle behind such a dual culture is a deliberate 'situation specific' behavioural decision on the part of individuals. Social structure in rural society demands that reverence is shown to older members in the household, kin group and caste. But dual culture may also be seen as reflecting a transitional stage in a dynamic process in rural society wherein notions of purity and pollution are gradually being eroded (see, Karanth 1981; and Karanth and Sivaprasad 1987).

However, the weakening of the ideas of purity and impurity is only one aspect of the process active in rural India today. They are also manifesting themselves in certain new areas as far as the lower castes are concerned. Nowadays, it is not only the higher castes

who observe pollution for a certain number of days at birth, death, menstruation, or the birth of a calf, and the death of a cow, but also the lower. Lower castes, including the Scheduled Castes, invite a high caste priest to perform a purificatory rite on the birth of a calf in the house. Female workers abstain from work for a few days during their monthly periods. Village barbers and washermen are even now pressurized by upper and dominant castes not to serve members of the Scheduled Castes. However, they may be served by the same service specialists in a nearby town. In the distribution of consecrated articles (prasad) after the worship of a village deity, upper caste members are served first and Scheduled Castes at the end. In many South Indian villages, the procession carrying the village deity during the annual village festival is a night long affair. The image of the deity is carried throughout the village, each caste worshipping it with fruit and flower in its ward (keri). The procession reaches the Scheduled Caste area last. However, the image of the deity does not enter the Scheduled Caste keri but stops at the entrance to it, even though the musicians leading the procession are usually members of Scheduled Castes. They worship earlier in the day at a shrine in their keri before taking part in the village festival activities.[5]

Notions of purity and impurity come to the fore also on some other festive occasions. Villagers in many places in India follow the practice of worshipping standing crops. Among the Coorgs it is observed as 'puttari' (Srinivas 1952), while elsewhere in the country it is celebrated as Sankranti, Maribali, Pongal, Onam and so on. On this day, in some parts of interior Karnataka, farmers take a purificatory bath and proceed to the fields to make offerings of food and beverage to a stone image representing the deity presiding over crops. At this festival (also at the festival in which anthills, representing snakes, are worshipped) members of higher castes have to be so pure that they may not even see members of the lower castes. The latter stay at home to avoid being seen by the members of higher castes proceeding to the fields. Bonded labourers from the lower castes enjoy a free day on such occasions, although they may not get food from their masters' kitchens.

While the ideas of purity and impurity are weakening generally

they are also manifesting themselves in certain new situations described above. Be that as it may, discrimination continues to be practised against the former 'Untouchable' castes. For instance, even in the more progressive villages, food and beverages are served to them in distinct vessels in teashops. Denying entry into temples or access to public wells are offences punishable by law but attempts are made to circumvent the law by making them out to be private property. Indeed, castewise segregation seems to penetrate even public housing meant specially for the weaker sections. Traditional forces are so powerful that they intervene at the time of the allotment of houses or house-sites to prevent or minimize mixed housing. Temple entry and the right of Scheduled Castes to take out wedding processions in areas inhabited by high castes have become major issues of confrontation.

If in a village members of the former 'Untouchable' castes have succeeded in obtaining access to village wells, teashops and temples it is because of the pressure of new forces. Such success represents a retreat on the part of high castes. However, where entry into their houses is concerned, they have tended to follow traditional norms. Agricultural labourers from the lower castes are at best allowed entry into the outer areas but not to the inner, more private and 'pure' areas. This does not provoke the lower castes, but in some cases results in their tending to avoid visiting the houses of the upper castes except when they have work. Landowners are thus forced to visit the areas inhabited by the lower castes, including the former 'Untouchables', when they are in need of labour. Bringing down the upper castes a notch or two gives pleasure to the lower.

IV

Closely related to the notions of purity and impurity are the norms of caste endogamy. Ideally marriages took place within one's own caste, often within its narrowest sub-division. While there are some perceptible changes in marriage customs and rituals among almost all castes in rural India, the norm of caste endogamy has withstood

change (see Kolenda 1978: 92-93). The endogamous unit consists of a series of kin clusters living in a fairly restricted area (Srinivas 1980:53). However, in large parts of northern India, village exogamy continues to be the rule for many castes. Inter-caste marriages in the past resulted in a loss of caste status due to excommunication, often damaging the prospects of marriage for the unmarried girls and boys in the concerned families. Public lynching of the erring couples also occurred occasionally. However, rural society is more tolerant of such marriages now, though the concerned couples generally emigrate from the village. Hypergamy, the custom of women marrying men from a higher caste, or a higher grade within the same caste, is disappearing among such castes as Bengali Brahmins, the Nayars of Kerala and the Rajputs in Rajasthan. While its practice in the past may be attributed, among others, to demographic factors like imbalance in the male-female sex ratio, its decline may be attributed to a widening structural gulf between different castes and social and economic changes within the concerned castes.

A new trend in caste endogamy is the expansion in some areas of what may be called the effective endogamous unit. Thus, while formerly marriages tended to occur in the smallest named sub-caste, nowadays sub-caste barriers are being crossed, particularly by the urbanized and educated élite in each caste. This is due to education, urbanization, expansion of mental horizons and the emergence of something akin to 'class consciousness', particularly among the more populous and dominant rural castes. The policy of 'protective discrimination' towards the backward classes and the struggle for access to scarce resources and political power have all resulted in the breakdown of sub-caste barriers and the formation of big castes.

Caste endogamy persists also because of the importance attached to the family histories of marriage partners. There are some castes such as the Lingayats in Karnataka and the Balajigas in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka which include many castes, some of which were regarded as of low status but which have Sanskritized their lifestyle and rituals over a period of time. But among both castes the histories of the families concerned are traced to avoid contracting an alliance with converts from low status groups.

A few other changes affecting caste also occur nowadays in rural weddings. First, there is an increasing tendency to adopt the complex customs and rituals of higher castes which lead to the employment of Brahmin priests or Sanskritized non-Brahmin priests. Several caste associations now run Sanskrit schools in order to train priests who can perform priestly duties for the community. Second, weddings among most castes nowadays are performed in a temple or a community hall (choultry) in the village, or in a nearby town. One of the results of this new tendency is that the role of service castes such as the barber, washerman and village musicians is minimized. It has become common to hire the services of professionals who are usually from outside the village. Teams of urban cooks often prepare the wedding feast and they generally belong to a high caste whose food would be acceptable to the bulk of the guests. But the food prepared by professional cooks is usually served by relatives and friends of the bride's family. The guests come from a variety of castes, and they all sit together for the meal. Caste distinctions are usually ignored, higher caste guests accepting food served by the bride's relatives and friends. The rules of purity and impurity are relaxed at modern weddings.

The institution of dowry — giving cash and valuable goods to the groom and his close kin — has spread to all castes. Dowry in pre-British days was mainly characteristic of castes in South India (see Srinivas 1989: 8). But during the last four or five decades dowry has become an essential element of weddings cutting across geographical barriers, caste divisions and rural-urban differences. Further, in some parts of the country there is a pressure on parents of girls to find urban employment for grooms. Urban-employed youth attract even higher sums of dowry than others. Bride price is now a mere symbol among the South Indian castes.

V

I have referred earlier to the concept of the dominant caste in rural society. The validity of this concept has been questioned (Dube 1968;

Oommen 1970). I do not wish to repeat the arguments against the concept or restate its original formulation by Srinivas (1959). I am inclined to believe that the criticisms are theoretical and addressed more to the formulation of the concept rather than to the realities as they obtain in rural India. When Srinivas first formulated the concept he pointed out that certain castes which are ritually high, economically well-off, politically powerful and numerically strong, may be considered dominant. In his later writings he reiterated that even a ritually lower caste may become dominant by virtue of its economic, political and numerical strength. Criticisms by Dube have been answered by Srinivas (1987) and I do not wish to repeat them here. My concern here is that if, as the critics (not necessarily the ones mentioned herein) believe, there is no such thing as a dominant caste, or its power is much weakened by factions within it, how does a social scientist account for the existing pattern of behaviour between different castes in rural areas? Why, for instance, are political parties so concerned about the caste composition of a constituency before they finalize the list of candidates for elections to the local bodies and upwards? How is it possible for a caste to impose social boycott on members of lower and vulnerable castes, or carry out massive acts of violence against them when the position of *dominating* castes is threatened? Below is an extract from a report on an incidence of violence involving a 'majority' caste and a lower caste whose strength in the region is substantial:

> This is a Reddy-Telaga *majority* village in a Kamma belt with a Reddy population of about 3500 and a sizeable number of Telagas. It has about 2000 SCs. Velliveru and Manchala are the adjoining villages where the Reddy *dominate* in all spheres . . .
>
> On July 4, (1991) . . . a SC undergraduate student went to see the film at the local . . . theatre. He was holding a 'chair' class ticket. A close relative of the sarpanch . . . a Reddy had also gone to see the film. As the film began (the Reddy) suddenly felt somebody's foot touching his back . . . (and found it to be the SC student's) . . . But

enraged at the audacity of a 'Maala' occupying a chair class seat and that too in an 'impolite posture' (the) Reddy thrashed (the SC student) Ravi in the theatre and left the scene . . .

But having come to know that the Harijans could even think of lodging a police complaint the leaders, the Reddys, decided to teach the 'erring' Harijans a lesson. Part of the 'lesson' was the social boycott of the entire Harijan community. The reprisal included denial of work to Harijans in the fields, importing labour from outside, prohibiting barbers, potters, etc., from selling their services to the Harijans. In short, a social and economic war was declared on the hapless community.

As all the dalit men in the village fled they found the Reddys and other upper caste people blocking their passage armed with deadly weapons (Shatrugna 1991) (parentheses and emphasis mine).

The above report provides enough evidence of the existence of dominance in a village or a local area by a particular caste. While dominant castes exist in rural areas there are, however, problems in formulating the concept. Which of the indicators of dominance is more important? What happens when a caste possesses one or two of the attributes of dominance but lacks the others? These, for instance, are among the questions which Oommen (1970) posed. The answers to them are to be found in the manner in which the attributes (present or absent) are relevant in influencing the social, political and economic situation of the village or region. Thus it is possible for a caste to be numerically insignificant but economically or politically powerful, and therefore a 'dominant' caste. This is perhaps happening in a few places where trading castes have become rich in the urban areas they have migrated to. With their physical proximity to political parties and leaders they may wield influence out of proportion to their numbers. Bengalis in Orissa, Marwaris in many southern Indian towns and cities, Reddys and Kammas in several parts of the country, and toddy-tappers and shepherd castes

in Karnataka, provide examples of castes (or ethnic groups) enjoying a kind of dominance away from their core areas.

The point I wish to make is that it is not always necessary for a caste to have all the attributes of dominance as defined in the concept, but one or two are enough to ensure a modicum of dominance. When all the attributes are present in a single caste then we have its 'decisive dominance'. 'Decisive dominance' is more characteristic of multi-caste villages than cities.

Another objection to the concept of dominant caste arises from the view that castes are faction-ridden, and therefore, it is wrong to regard them as unitary entities. But factionalism is often contextual. Thus a caste, or to be more specific, the local section of a sub-caste, may be internally divided into a few factions. Such factionalism is particularly noticeable in intra-caste contexts, but the factions close up in relation to other castes. In other words, the existence of factions is not always a barrier to a caste acting as a single, unified entity on occasion. In this connection I am reminded of the experience of a Maratha landowner in Rajapura village in south Karnataka in 1979. This man wanted to leave the village after selling the land he owned in it. But he was unable to get what he considered a good price. The only buyers who could pay that were the better-off members of the dominant Okkaliga caste. But the latter combined to make sure that the price did not rise above a certain sum, and this in spite of the fact that the Okkaligas of Rajapura were a divided lot. The landowner remarked ruefully that quarrels existed amongst Okkaligas only while the mutton was being cooked. Once it was cooked, everyone joined in to partake of the dinner.

The dominance of a caste in a village or a region is likely to be demonstrated if one looks at the direction in which land transfers take place over a period of time. Based on my own studies in two regions in Karnataka with two separate dominant castes I am inclined to think that over a period of time land ownership moves towards the dominant caste. Correspondingly, landless labourers from the dominant caste have a greater chance of becoming landowners than members of other castes. Indeed, one of the driving forces behind a caste wanting to maintain its dominance is to make certain that its

members fare well economically, politically and socially.

I shall now make a few tentative remarks about caste in rural India. In the first place, it may not be appropriate any more to refer to caste in rural India as a 'system'. Castes exist as individual groups, but no longer integrated into a system, with the dovetailing of their interests. Castes are in competition with each other for obtaining access to material resources, education and a share in political power. Since Independence and the Constitutional provision of safeguards for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, there has been increased violence against Scheduled Castes by the higher castes. The latter deeply resent the benefits and concessions provided for the former, and the claims to equality with higher castes put forward by the educated members of Scheduled Castes. Also, organizations have sprung up to rouse the members of Scheduled and other 'low' castes to an awareness of their rights and privileges. It is becoming increasingly common to refer to ex-Untouchables as Dalits, though the term is also often used to include all the poor and oppressed. While this is doing some good for the very poor in the villages it is also encouraging anti-Dalit sentiments in the upper castes, often resulting in the Dalits being boycotted by the higher castes and subjected to physical voilence. But the net result of all these recent changes is the reduced vulnerability of the Dalits as compared with the situation obtaining before Independence. Universal adult franchise, greater political awareness among the weaker sections and better opportunities of employment and mobility are all responsible for the changed situation.

Some years ago it was thought that castes would be replaced by classes, but nowadays very few subscribe to this belief. Further, it appears as though during the next few decades the Dalits are likely to emerge as a strong force against the higher castes. But I would hesitate to describe such a conflict as a class conflict given the existence of divisions within each of the opposed formations.[6] Doubts have already been expressed about whether the Scheduled Castes, as notified in the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, represent the true interests of the former 'Untouchable' castes or whether benefits will go largely to the late entrants to the list who were really not

'Untouchable' castes. But that is not going to alter the fact that the main conflict in the near future will be between the higher castes and Dalits and not just between higher and lower castes.

Further, thanks to the fact that greater access to education, government jobs and a variety of other concessions and facilities are linked to classification as 'backward', Scheduled Caste consciousness is not likely to abate but increase the tensions which are so conspicuous a feature of urban social life. Such tensions will also penetrate rural areas.

It is a matter of common knowledge that caste plays an active role in the political life of the country at all levels. Indeed allotment of party tickets, formation of state ministries, and appointment to numerous boards, committees and commissions, are made on a caste basis, and this seems to be accepted as legitimate by the bulk of the people. Thus, India marches on to a 'casteless and classless' society.

Notes

1. There are a few exeeptions though (e.g., Tapper 1987), dealing with caste. Preoccupation with caste was characteristic of the decades before 1970 as is illustrated in *Social Stratification* edited by Dipankar Gupta (1991). For discussion of trends in Indian sociology see Mukherjee 1977, Rao 1979 and Oommen 1984.
2. There is a general belief that caste panchayats began declining in the post-Independence era. This is not true. With the spread of the Western legal system and courts, and the emergence of lawyers as professionals, villagers started taking their disputes to the urban law courts instead of the local panchayats. With education, urbanization and the availability of alternate occupation in the city, the sanctions at the disposal of the panchayats weakened gradually. Finally, the freedom movement, notably under Gandhi, carried the message that caste was divisive and untouchability a national shame. But then Gandhi also denounced law courts and lawyers and revitalized panchayats but presumably not caste panchayats.
3. Indeed, one may find different kinds of social bases for Hindu fundamentalism. For instance, the one identified with what is known as the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh may be said to be drawing support from Brahmins, and hence presents a Brahminical model of Hindu fundamentalism. In contrast, the Shiva Sena in Maharashtra may be seen as

drawing support from all the castes in Maharashtra, with a regional appeal. As such the model would be one of broad basing the caste system but with an emphasis on Hindu, Sanskritic and regional ideals.

4. According to one recent source of data (Singh 1992), 7.9 per cent endogamous communities in India have become non-vegetarian in food habits, having been vegetarians traditionally. However, the reverse trend is relatively more in percentage figures: 9 per cent of the non-vegetarian communities have turned vegetarian in food habits.
5. Often worshipping among them involves sacrifice of a buffalo, which is forbidden or scorned by the higher castes. Separate shrines among the ex-Untouchable castes may be viewed as an expression of protest. One may also argue that the religious practices among the ex-Untouchable castes have not been Sanskritized to the extent that the other castes have. For, the deity worshipped by both is same although in different locations within the village the rituals are different.
6. However, I do not deny the existence of classes within a caste.

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BACKWARD CLASS MOVEMENTS IN TAMIL NADU

P. Radhakrishnan

The expression 'backward class movements' is used here in the limited sense of organized efforts for mobility in the secular order of society by communities which are overwhelmingly backward in the access they have to sources of power, and goods and services.[1] This paper is concerned with such movements in Tamil Nadu. It will cover the non-Brahmin movement, the earliest expression of organized efforts for social mobility during the British period; its offshoots—the movements of the depressed classes and of the backward Hindus, the two main streams of the backward classes proper; the latest of these movements by Vanniyars, the single largest caste among the backward classes; and the impact of these movements on the current reservation policy.

The Non-Brahmin Movement

While the non-Brahmin movement is treated as the first of the 'backward class movements' in Tamil Nadu (see Irschick 1969: 353; Rao 1979:10), it had a narrow social base, and was led by an élite organization of rajas, zamindars, industrialists, lawyers, and doctors (Béteille 1969: 176), 'from families with generations of involvement

in the government services and the professions behind them' (Washbrook 1977: 279). Nevertheless, it was this movement which paved the way for the 'backward class movements' proper; and introduced a distinctive communal idiom into South Indian politics (Béteille 1969: 163, 178) and policies on the backward classes.

The non-Brahmin movement took place only after the 1910s, but long before that non-Brahmins were protesting against the virtual monopoly of Brahmins in the educational and employment opportunities offered by the British, which, as the traditional literati, the Brahmins found easier to avail themselves of. In 1840, 32 Panchalar from Salem protested against offering Brahmins all the responsible public offices, and prayed for employing all classes of men without distinction (see Bower 1851: 91-95). In 1896, 15 persons from Anantapur deplored the control of public offices by a 'family coach' as disastrous to public interest and dispiriting to the people. In 1897, the Visvakulotharana Association of Madras was even more eloquent.[2]

While such sporadic protests occurred in the nineteenth century, what is more to the point is that they eventually crystallized into a movement. At least four factors were responsible for this.

First, the British placed curbs on Brahmin preponderance. On ascertaining that the revenue establishment in Nellore was controlled by as many as 50 Brahmins, all from the same family, and that the Collector could transfer only two of them, the Governor recorded (in 1853) that:

> . . . the Head of the office—the European Officer—must be almost powerless to detect and punish fraud or wrong on the part of the members of this family, and . . . to protect the people against the extortions or oppressions of the family (*Board of Revenue Proceedings*, 9 March 1854).

What followed was a Standing Order of the Board of Revenue (BSO):

> Collectors should be careful to see that the subordinate appointments . . . are not monopolized by . . . members of

> a few influential families. Endeavour should always be made to divide the principal appointments in each district among several castes. A proportion of the tahsildars . . . should belong to castes other than . . . Brahmin, and it should be a standing rule that the two chief revenue servants in the Collector's office should be of different castes (*ibid*).

Despite the warning in 1871 by W. R. Cornish, Census Superintendent of Madras, against viewing every question connected with the progress of the country through 'Brahmin spectacles' (see *Government of Madras* 1874:197), even in the 1880s, efforts to enforce this order were 'necessarily fitful, constantly neutralized, and at the best but partial' (see *Board of Revenue Proceedings*, 12 March 1886). However, from that time well into this century the government continued its efforts to keep the Brahmins in check, which pitted non-Brahmins against Brahmins.

Second, the educational expansion since the 1890s: Of the total Brahmins who passed out as matriculates/BA graduates from the Madras Presidency over a period of about 60 years from 1858 to 1917, about 57 to 61 per cent were in the last 17 years 1901-1917 alone. Of the non-Brahmin Hindus who passed out about 58 to 66 per cent were in these 17 years. Throughout these 60 years the share of Brahmins in the total matriculates/BA graduates in the Presidency as a whole was very high, while that of non-Brahmin Hindus was very low.

Brahmins were only about three per cent of the total Presidency population. But, of the total matriculates/BA graduates of the Presidency they accounted for about 54 to 62 per cent during 1858 and 63 to 66 per cent during 1901-1917. Though the non-Brahmin Hindus accounted for about 86 per cent of the Presidency population, the corresponding figures for them were only 24/16 per cent and 24/23 per cent. But, in numerical terms the increase since 1900 of both matriculates and BA graduates was substantial enough for the emergence of an educated middle class even among the latter.[3]

Third, the migration of members of this middle class to Madras,

the hub of all political and administrative activities: Many of them had a family history of British service and aspirations for success in their careers (see Washbrook 1977: 218-220).

Fourth, work on the 'dyarchy' constitution: This offered the non-Brahmin élite a much needed opportunity for taking on the Brahmin might. The opposition crystallized into the South Indian Liberal Federation (Justice Party), and the release of the 'non-Brahmin manifesto' by 1917.[4] With its release began the most active and vocal phase of the non-Brahmin movement for protecting the interests of non-Brahmins from the domination of Brahmins in education, employment, and political life.

The movement was led by members of the upper castes: Vellalas, Reddys, Kammas, Velamas, and Nairs and supporters from these and the upper trading castes. Its ideology was founded on conjectures about non-Brahmin Hindus as Dravidians, and Brahmins as Aryans, and the loss of the glory of the former after invasion by the latter. Its organizational outfit was the Justice Party and the units, while its communication outlets were the Party organs *Justice, Dravidian,* and *Andhra Prakasika*, in English, Tamil and Telugu respectively, and the numerous non-Brahmin conferences.

Its greatest achievement was securing, under the Government of India Act of 1919, 28 reserved seats for non-Brahmins out of the 98 elected seats in the Madras Legislature. Following its success in the elections which followed, the Justice Party dominated the debates in the newly constituted Legislative Council (see Irschick 1969:51-178, 226-28; Saraswathi 1974:37-80).

Responding to its demands the government initiated several measures.[5] These included extension of the principle prescribed in the BSO of 1853 to appointments in all departments; the introduction of communal returns on new appointments; restriction on appointments of Brahmins in the Secretariat; attempts to replace the Brahmins already employed in the Secretariat with non-Brahmins from mofussils, even transferring them to the Central Services; constitution of a Staff Selection Board for regulating appointments, and a legislative committee for reviewing the communal representation system; regulation of admissions to government

colleges through selection committees and communal ratios; and most important of all, the introduction of communal quotas in public services by the Communal GO of November 1927, allocating in a unit of 12 appointments, five (41.7 per cent) to non-Brahmin Hindus, two (16.7 per cent) each to Brahmins, Anglo-Indians/Christians, and Muslims, and one (8.3 per cent) to others.

Backward Class Movements: The Pre-Independence Phase

Despite its motto 'equal opportunities for all and injustice to none' (Patro 1932:43), the beneficiaries of the non-Brahmin movement were mostly the 'forward' non-Brahmins themselves whose ascendancy began in the 1920s and reached its peak in the 1950s (see Béteille 1969:174-175). What could be considered backward class movements were the organized demands by two broad strata of non-beneficiaries, namely, the depressed classes and backward Hindus, for a larger share of government patronage.

The organized demands of the depressed classes (DCs), used here for 'Untouchables',[6] began soon after the Justice ministry assumed office. These were mainly through questions and resolutions passed in different forms in the Legislative Council by their ten nominated members, mostly on representation in the public services, or matters such as devotion of a section in the Administration Report to DCs in the services; appointment of only DCs to posts like peons, duffadars, and dalayats; more facilities for the employment of DCs; and job reservation for DCs. Responding to some of these the government offered small concessions like the substitution of the paragraph in the Administration Report on the representation of Muslims in the services, with a paragraph on that of all the main castes including the DCs.[7]

In 1923 M. C. Rajah, the most prominent DC leader in Madras, led a deputation to the Governor accusing the Justice Party of not doing justice to DCs in nominations to the legislature and local bodies, and appointments to the services (Saraswathi 1974:171). He also accused it of arresting their progress; and of crushing their hopes

and aspirations. Stating that the DCs were anxious to share in the benefits of education, he demanded their compulsory elementary education with provision for a noon-meal, a compensatory allowance to parents who lost the services of wage-earning children, an adequate number of scholarships, liberal fee remissions in schools and colleges, and free hostels. Why should the DCs remain hewers of wood and drawers of water, and the caste-Hindus their lords for ever, he asked; and urged for at least 30 per cent reservation in the services. His other demands to the Governor, made in late 1924 on behalf of the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, included adequate representation in the legislature, representation by election, inclusion of a DC member in the cabinet and Executive Council, and creation of a department for DC welfare (Rajah 1925: *passim*).

The boycott of the Simon (Indian Statutory) Commission of 1928 by the Congress party for its 'non-Indian' character was seen as a blessing in disguise by many DC leaders. In a memorandum, the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha insisted on separate electorates for the DCs arguing that joint electorates were worse than even nominations, as DC candidates elected by caste-Hindus would not work for DCs. A provincial conference of the Madras DC Federation and a series of other conferences expressed solidarity with its demands. When the Commission's Report (published in May 1930) was rejected by the major contenders, and efforts were on to break the stalemate, many DC leaders appealed to Britain against transferring power and pleaded that a Congress Raj would crush the DCs (see Saraswathi 1974:171-72).

Under the Government of India Act of 1935 in Madras the DCs, known thence as Scheduled Castes (SCs),[8] were allotted 30 of the 215 seats in the legislature (see Irschick 1986:159; Saraswathi 1974: 173). Though in 1934 the government reserved for DCs exclusively the one appointment earmarked for 'others' under the Communal GO,[9] their long-standing demand for adequate representation was still a far cry. For well over a decade thence there were again several questions, and resolutions demanding more jobs, particularly in district and village administrations, appointment of a member to the Public Service Commission, the amendment of the Communal GO to provide more places to SCs and so on.[10]

During the same period the government received many petitions with requests for the allocation of three out of every twelve appointments for SCs; restoration of the original 'Communal Award' in place of the Poona pact;[11] more representation in the services; reservation of all posts of attenders, peons, sweepers, etc. for the SCs; increasing reservation for the SCs by 50 per cent; and so on. Responding to a 1938 petition from the SCs of Tirupati, and a 1939 petition from an 'individual' on the 'most deplorable' representation of SCs, it ordered the recruitment of SCs to the Madras Inferior Service, and to the posts of constables, compositors and attenders to which recruitment was not made on a communal basis. Its most important act was the revision of the Communal GO in November 1947 providing the SCs two (14.3 per cent) out of 14 appointments against the earlier one (8.3 per cent) out of 12.[12]

Backward Hindus

In actualizing this revision the backward Hindus also played a major role. In fact, their discontent surfaced soon after the Justice ministry assumed office. One indication of this was a 1923 no-confidence motion against it, though the motion was defeated (see Irschick 1969: 259; Saraswathi 1974:118). It was, however, only after the unsatisfactory working of the Communal GO for some time that they began to build up pressure.

To begin with there were many questions and resolutions in the Legislative Council on behalf of the artisan castes combine (Viswa Brahmins), most of them demanding their recognition as a Depressed Class. A 1932 resolution by Pandit Ganala Ramamurti and 27 other Members of the Legislative Council (MLCs) for inclusion of Viswa Brahmins in the DC list evoked protest from some individuals and associations, and support from the Viswakarma Young Men's Literary Association, Rajahmundry, and eight other representations with 1903 signatures. There were similar resolutions in 1933. The government decided to oppose them all as unfair to the DCs and to other non-Brahmin castes.

When their efforts to get included in the DC list failed, the MLCs shifted their ground: A 1934 resolution by Ramamurti and 23 others was for preferential treatment of Viswa Brahmins along with Vanniyakula Kshatriyas (Vanniyars), Setti Balijas, Chaklis, Devangis, Nadars, Nambudiri Brahmins, and other 'backward' communities, without their inclusion in the DC list. There were similar resolutions in 1935 and 1936. The preferences sought were mainly in appointments to public services—a higher age limit to appear for service commission examinations and to join the services, and in educational facilities.[13]

Meanwhile, the Vanniyars also began their organized efforts. In a 1935 budget motion S. A. Nanjappa claimed that though Vanniyars numbered over 30 lakhs (about 6.3 per cent of the Presidency population), their representation was very meagre. He recalled that he had brought this to the Chief Minister's notice during the general budget debates, and even waited upon him in a deputation, all to no avail. He requested the allocation of a reasonable share of every twelve appointments to the backward Hindu communities. In the 1936 debates he pleaded for separate representation of the Vanniyars.

In a memorial in July 1938, the Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam of Madras (founded in 1888) informed the Chief Minister that Vanniyars were far behind other communities in education and employment; and despite having more than 200 graduates, had only six of the 1713 gazetted officers. The Vanniyars' main requests were for their recognition as a separate community for communal representation, relaxation of the age limit for entry into the services, and preference in appointments to local bodies. The memorial also requested that the Chief Minister give its deputation a hearing.

When its requests were turned down, the Sangam in September 1938 made a stronger representation to the Chief Minister reiterating its demands. Among other things it stated that it 'had high hopes that the Congress Government would render every assistance for the uplift of the downtrodden communities, who, for many generations, did not have any share in the administrative departments of the Government', that '"non-Brahmin" is a loose and mischievous term and is used by politicians to suit their convenience', and that 'it

is not the birth-right of certain communities to get preference in the services'; and again urged the grant of an early interview. This letter had some effect. The interview was granted a month later with an assurance that the Sangam's request for relaxation of age limit would be considered.

In November 1938 the Sangam again addressed the Chief Minister requesting him to reconsider its other prayers. Stating that relaxation of age limit would not help them substantially, a public meeting of the Vanniyars held in Madras in the same month requested the granting of separate turns for the Vanniyars in the Communal GO, or at least one out of the five turns allotted to non-Brahmin Hindus. A conference held at Kumbakonam in February 1939, reportedly attended by about 1000 persons from different parts of the Presidency, requested the favourable consideration of the various prayers of the Sangam. So did the Sangam's golden jubilee conference held in May 1940.

According to this conference, backward Hindus received better treatment under the British oligarchy than under the Brahmin and Justice oligarchies; the last was mindful of only the interests of forward non-Brahmins; of the 608 non-Brahmin Hindu gazetted officers only 13 were backward Hindus; their condition in the legislature and local bodies was not any better; and they had no other goal than to organize the backward classes league.[14]

Backward Classes League

Efforts to organize the Madras Provincial Backward Classes League could be traced to a 1932 meeting of backward Hindu leaders including M. A. Manickavelu Nayakar, S. A. Nanjappa, P. K. Ramachandra Padayachi and H. Ari Gowder (see Irschick 1986: 73). The League was registered in 1935 as a non-political organization committed to the socio-economic and educational advancement of backward Hindus, with membership open to communities listed as backward under the Madras Educational Rules.

In November 1933, C. Basudev led a deputation to the Revenue

Member of the Executive Council, representing that the appointments reserved for non-Brahmin Hindus all went to a few forward communities, and urging separate representation for backward Hindus. This deputation was probably the earliest of the League's efforts. In the Legislative Council debates of 1934, Basudev, Manickavelu Nayakar, and other MLCs representing the backward Hindu communities, urged the same points. They suggested classification of these communities as the sixth group, or as a backward group, treating the remaining non-Brahmin Hindus and Brahmins as a non-backward group; or giving preference to backward Hindus in the turns for non-Brahmin Hindus.

Following a resolution by Nayakar the same year for adoption of a 'Hindu backward class', the government examined the matter at length. It felt that the Communal GO was not giving protection to those who needed it most. But it had difficulty in deciding who really were such communities, found it a big question, and decided not to take it up until it received a list as promised by Basudev when he led the deputation. It also felt that any change in the GO would create new grievances and new demands, that no useful purpose would be served by attempting remedies which might prove worse than the disease itself. Its obvious choice was to oppose all demands for alteration.

This, however, did not deter the MLCs. In a 1935 budget motion on the urgent need for revising the GO, Basudev deplored that for nearly half the population the GO had no meaning and offered absolutely no advantage, while Nayakar claimed that it was only doing communal injustice to the major part of the population. In the face of a rising tirade against the GO, and clamour for separate representation, the Chief Minister, C. Rajagopalachari, replying to a 1937 debate, expressed his dismay:

> It is very tragic that these places in the Government service still occupy the most important part in our consideration of public affairs. It is tragic . . . because it shows how poor our country is. It shows there are no industries. It shows that we are not getting on very well as a nation and

> that is why we are quarreling over these Government and local body jobs as the most important thing in the world and raising it to the dignified level of a communal problem.

Replying to a 1939 debate, he again gave vent to his frustration:

> It is wrong to allow this communal talk to become the daily subject and daily pabulum in this House. There is nothing else referred to here by people except this question of communities. Is it good for us? Yet, it is an original sin. It sticks. Let us get out of it. Let us try to reduce the virulence of this original sin. Let us try to make it less and less and not more and more.

Meanwhile the Backward Classes League started the *Backward Classes Journal* as the 'advocate of the backward Hindus', and began to hold regular annual conferences. Its first conference held in Madras in 1939 was reportedly attended by delegates and leaders of backward Hindu communities from all over the Presidency. Its second conference held at Ootacamund in 1940, presided over by the Maharani of Vizianagaram, and inaugurated by the Maharaja of Pithapuram, was reportedly attended by nearly 20,000 delegates. Proceedings of each conference were presented to the government, and published in the League's organ.

The fifth conference held at Ootacamund in 1943 was reportedly marked by an impressive rally of about 7,000 scouts. In his presidential address, M. Giriappa observed that the Congress leaders were not in sympathy with the aspirations of the backward classes, that the Justice Party was practically defunct, and that Ramaswami Naicker, founder of the Self-Respect Party, who had the rare opportunity of bringing about social reconstruction in South India, had drifted into politics and allowed himself to be dragged on by the chariot wheel of the Justice Party, and was neither here nor there. He, therefore, exhorted the backward Hindus to work for their salvation independently of all political parties, and organize themselves into an independent national party.

The resolutions of this conference included reservation of seats in the legislature and local bodies for backward Hindus of the Presidency and revision of the Communal GO for their separate representation, both proportionate to their numerical strength.[15]

Following persistent demands by the League, other associations, and the SCs, the government revised the Communal GO in November 1947. In a unit of 14 appointments, the revised GO allocated six (42.9 per cent) to forward non-Brahmin Hindus, two (14.3 per cent) each to backward Hindus, Brahmins, and SCs, and one (7.1 per cent) each to Anglo-Indians/Christians, and Muslims (see GO 3437 Public, 21 November 1947).

Backward Class Movements: The Post-Independence Phase

After Independence the first organized demands were for protecting this GO in the wake of a ruling of the Madras High Court in July 1950 that it was *ultra vires* of the Constitution. Following a vigorous campaign by E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker through his speeches, his party Dravida Kazhagam, and its organ *Viduthalai*, 14 August 1950 was observed as 'Communal GO Day', with strikes by students, hartal by merchants, 'Communal GO Safeguard Processions', and public meetings. Speaking on the occasion, Naicker declared his intention to launch an all-party struggle for the reintroduction of the GO by restricting the rights and privileges of every community strictly according to its population (see GO 231 Public [Confidential], 30 January 1951).

While the Madras government's appeal against the High Court ruling assuaged feelings for some time, the Supreme Court judgement of March 1951 upholding it again caused considerable concern. Partly out of a conviction that the GO, in existence for over two decades, was indispensable for rendering justice to the less advanced communities, and partly for fear of social unrest, in April 1951 the Madras Assembly carried a resolution moved by the Chief Minister.

It authorized the government 'to adopt such measures as are necessary for admission to the Government professional colleges and appointments in Government services as will conduce to the welfare of all classes of citizens'. Armed with this resolution and the related proceedings supporting it, the Chief Minister and other ministers rushed to Delhi seeking an amendment to the Constitution.

Meanwhile, sensing its favourable disposition, and urging it to immediate action, the ministry received a spate of telegrams, letters, and resolutions of meetings and conferences from several individuals and associations. Their requests included retention of the GO for at least 10 to 15 years, reservation for the backward classes according to their population, and classification of the entire population into forward, backward, and SCs, with reservation of 30 per cent, 55 per cent, and 15 per cent respectively.

In keeping with the provisions of Article 15(4), added to the Constitution at its instance in June 1951 through the first Constitutional Amendment,[16] the ministry reintroduced reservations in both education and employment, with 15 per cent for SCs and STs (Scheduled Tribes) and 25 per cent for socially and educationally backward classes (BCs), leaving the rest for open competition by the entire population. While the SCs and STs were already listed, the BCs were communities specified under the Madras Educational Rules (mostly backward Hindus of the earlier GO) and converts to Christianity from SCs (see GO 2432 Public, 27 September 1951).

This new scheme of reservations did not bring cheer to all among the BCs. In a letter to the Chief Minister, the Madras Provincial Backward, Scheduled Classes and Tribes Federation, stated that the educational reservation of 25 per cent for the BCs was too inadequate, and the restrictions on admissions were too severe. It accused the government of working for the advanced communities at the expense of the BCs, and at the same time pretending to safeguard and advance the interests of the BCs. It requested the Chief Minister to increase the BCs' reservation to 50 per cent, to club the SCs, STs and BCs as one category for 65 per cent reservations, and to treat a mere pass in the intermediate examination

as sufficient for admission to graduate courses. It warned him that failure to comply with its requests would have grave consequences for his party in the general elections which were about to take place. In another letter, A. Subramaniam, Congress MLA from Salem, requested him to allot the BCs at least 60 per cent of the educational admissions, and 75 per cent of the appointments, and threatened to walk out of the Congress party along with other BC members if he failed to heed this request. The government, however, found both the requests inadmissible (see GO 2659 Education, 6 October 1951).

Meanwhile, unable to secure any guarantee from the Congress party of representation in the services and local bodies proportionate to their population, in the 1949 elections to the district boards, the Vanniyars contested as independents and secured 22 out of the 52 seats in South Arcot, defeating many Congress candidates. Anticipating the general elections to the state assembly, a state-wide conference of the Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam convened in 1951 resolved that the Vanniyars should contest the elections in cooperation with the toiling masses, and to that effect formed the Tamilnad Toilers' Party, under the leadership of M. A. Manickavelu Nayakar and S. S. Ramaswami Padayachi. Though this party soon split, with the Toilers' Party of Padayachi remaining strong in South Arcot and Salem, and the new Commonweal Party of Nayakar in North Arcot and Chingleput, in the elections the former won 19 seats, and the latter six seats.

Responding to the overtures of the Congress party which failed to secure majority in the state assembly, first the Commonweal Party, and later, the Toilers' Party, supported it in return for ministerships for both the leaders in the eight-member cabinet. With this both the parties were dissolved and their members joined the Congress (see Rudolph and Rudolph 1967:52-54; Smith 1963:387-88). Though there were questions and resolutions for Vanniyars in particular, and BCs in general, the leadership of the Vanniyars gradually became moribund, and for quite some time the Vanniyar movement, and for that matter the BCs movement in general, became dormant and the reservations introduced in the 1950s remained unchanged for the next two decades.

Politics of Accommodation

Following the recommendations of the first BCs Commission of 1969, the M. Karunanidhi-led Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) ministry which constituted it enhanced reservation for the BCs from 25 to 31 per cent (against the recommended 33 per cent), and for the SC-STs to 18 per cent (against the recommended continuation of the existing 16 per cent) in 1971.[17] However, it refused to implement the recommendation to prescribe an annual income limit of Rs 9,000 on BCs families for eligibility to BCs concessions, lest it should incur the displeasure of vested interests among the BCs. The income limit was intended to prevent the 'creaming effect' of reservations.[18]

When the M. G. Ramachandran-led All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) ministry issued a GO in July 1979 prescribing this income limit, ostensibly for ensuring that the benefits of reservations reached the really backward among the BCs and were not cornered by the affluent upper crust, there were protests against its enforcement, and agitations demanding its immediate withdrawal. In particular, there was the threat of a three-stage stir by the militant DMK-Dravida Kazhagam (DK) combine. In the wake of these developments, on the eve of the dismissal of his ministry after his party's defeat in the January 1980 Lok Sabha elections, M. G. Ramachandran announced the withdrawal of this GO. And, as though to outwit his adversaries, he also announced an increase in the reservation for BCs from 31 to 50 per cent.

While disposing of a batch of writ petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the GOs giving effect to these announcements, the Supreme Court in October 1982 directed the Tamil Nadu government to appoint a new commission within two months for reviewing the existing list of BCs after enumeration and a factual and scientific investigation of their conditions. In pursuance of this, the Ramachandran ministry constituted the second BCs Commission in December 1982.

The dissenting views of 14 of the 21 members of this Commission made its report controversial right from the time of its submission in February 1985. Among other things, the dissenters were against the

inclusion in the chairman's recommendations of 17 forward communities as BCs, and the exclusion of 34 communities from the existing BC list. Their demands were, therefore, for retaining the existing BC list, with 67 per cent reservation as against the much reduced 32 per cent recommended by the chairman.

In the heat of the controversy, the Ramachandran ministry did not make the report public, and despite repeated requests refused to table it in the assembly. However, through a series of GOs issued in July 1985, it made selective use of this report. These GOs contain the ministry's orders to continue the existing 50 per cent reservation for BCs (in addition to the 18 per cent for SCs-STs) in both education and employment, considering the Commission's estimate of the BC population at 67 per cent and the 'majority members' recommendation' for 67 per cent reservation; to add 29 forward communities, without at the same time deleting any of the communities recommended for deletion; and to retain the existing list of most backward classes (MBCs) within the BC list.[19]

Such increasing politicization of BCs and reservations, and the politics of accommodation practised since the 1970s, have had at least two consequences for the BCs. One is the exacerbation of the condition of certain very backward communities culminating in violent outbursts because of the meagre spread effects of the reservation benefits due to the enormous size of the target groups, and the cornering of these limited benefits by certain advanced and undeserving communities. The other is the scramble for nestling under the state's much-hackneyed BCs list for cornering more and more of the available benefits. The recent Vanniyar agitations brought out both these consequences very clearly.

Vanniyar Agitations

Vanniyars, who account for about 12 per cent of the state's population concentrated in its northern districts, especially in South Arcot, are the largest of the BCs and account for about one-fifth of the total BC population in the state. Though they have been striving for social

mobility and demanding a larger share of state patronage for a long time, they are still very backward, and till recently the proportion of reservation benefits available to them was not even half of their proportion in the BC population. Their agitations were, therefore, for exclusive reservation of 20 per cent jobs and educational admissions for their community in the state and two per cent jobs in the Centre..

These agitations were spearheaded by a new Vanniyar Sangam, whose emergence, as its founder put it, symbolized the deep-rooted frustration and bitterness of the Vanniyars over the way successive governments had cheated them. Founded in 1980 by a local medical practitioner by bringing together some 27 local Vanniyar organizations, with a younger, militant, and educated leadership, but highly vulnerable cadres, the Sangam has experienced phenomenal growth since 1986, particularly in South Arcot district where almost all villages have its units. It claims to have as many as 10,000 units in the state with an overall membership of 35 lakhs.

The main grievance of the Sangam's founder is that successive governments have included in the BC list many undeserving communities, which are grabbing all the reservation benefits, leaving practically nothing for the really backward. Hence his insistence on exclusive reservations for his community.

He has a long list of the Sangam's all-out efforts from 1980 to 1988 to apprise the government of its grievances: It organized 25 district conferences and over 5,000 public meetings. It sent innumerable telegrams and more than 25 letters to the Chief Minister, M. G. Ramachandran, pleading for a meeting to apprise him of the Vanniyars' problems, and 15 letters to the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. It went ahead with processions, demonstrations, stopping of trains, and a one-day road-block agitation in 1986. When all these were of no avail, it organized a one-week road-block agitation in September 1987.

This agitation turned very violent and destructive, claimed at least 20 lives in both police firing and clashes between Vanniyars and SCs, and led to the arrest of over 20,000 persons. Though directed against the government, the main victims of the Vanniyars' fury

were (and have always been) the hapless SCs with whom they have much in common, especially poverty and backwardness. The Vanniyars are proud of being (just) above the traditional pollution line (in fact for a long time they were harping on their Kshatriya status), and hence of being the immediate caste superiors of the SCs, but the frustration of not being singled out for the kind of special treatment extended to the latter led them to unleash their fury on the SCs.

Though the Ramachandran ministry refused to negotiate with the Vanniyars when the agitation was on, the violence, death, and devastation left behind by this agitation forced it to review the vexatious reservation issue. This triggered vociferous claims and counter-claims from practically all other caste and communal organizations—forward, backward, and middling, of virtually every conceivable social unit in the state — for their share of the reservation benefits, based on inflated estimates of their numerical strength in the state's population (see for details Radhakrishnan 1989a:506-10).

With no solution in sight, and with M. G. Ramachandran dead and gone in December 1987, when the state came under President's rule, the Vanniyar Sangam threatened in August 1988 to boycott the elections to the Tamil Nadu assembly, declared the Vanniyar strongholds out of bounds for any kind of political activity, with a ban on hoisting party flags and holding meetings until the government acceded to the demands. Provocative graffiti like 'beware of political dogs that may seek your votes, thrash them, drive them away', were a common sight in the villages. The Vanniyars' threat looming large, and the uncertainty of the Congress party's success in the elections in such a situation, led to the postponement of the elections.

Towards the close of President's rule when the administration revived its attempts, and the Centre deputed its External Affairs Minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, to tackle this Vanniyar tangle, the state again witnessed a flurry of caste and communal organizations reiterating their claims, some with threats of violence and poll boycott. The Governor stated that he had received representations for proportional reservation in the services and educational institutions

not only from Vanniyars but also from various other communities, while Narasimha Rao reported that he had held talks with representatives of as many as 42 communities.

Partly in response to the pressures of the Vanniyar Sangam, and partly as an electoral ploy of the Congress, in December 1988, on the eve of the elections, the Tamil Nadu governor announced the acceptance of compartmental reservation for certain BCs, and postponement of its actual implementation to the findings of a survey ordered simultaneously on the BC population and backwardness. But the Vanniyar leaders spurned this offer, reiterated their resolve to boycott the elections, and organized a one-day bandh on 16 December 1988, again adding to the prevailing tension, with the death of one person, and the arrest of over 8,000 persons.

Partly in fulfilment of one of its poll-promises, and partly to outwit its adversary, the Congress (I), at whose instance the Governor had announced his decision on compartmental reservation, the DMK ministry which assumed office after the January 1989 elections, stopped the survey in February 1989, and ordered compartmental reservation in the following month. Out of the overall 50 per cent BC reservations for 201 communities accounting for an estimated 67 per cent of the state's population, it set apart 20 per cent for 39 communities listed as most backward within the BC list and 68 communities listed as denotified tribes, together accounting for about 36 per cent of the BC population.

Though this falls short of the Vanniyars' demand, it is very close to that. For, as the largest community among the most backward classes listed, accounting for about 53 per cent of their population, and probably the least backward among them, the Vanniyars are expected to get the lion's share of the benefits. Whether this has already been happening is too early to say. But, what is important to note here is that though the Vanniyar Sangam initially dismissed this decision as treachery and an insult, with it the latest of the BC movements, probably the most militant of all the movements so far, seems to have come to an end.

Conclusion

Backward class movements in Tamil Nadu began with the non-Brahmin movement. After the initial victory of this movement conflicts arose in it, splitting the heterogeneous ensemble of 'non-Brahmins' whom it claimed to represent, into the two broad categories 'forward' and 'backward'. The subsequent movements of the backward non-Brahmins have continued in one form or another, with the recent Vanniyar agitations as the latest of them.

These movements have certainly made an important contribution to the development of what Gabriel Almond described in another context as 'bargaining culture', which he considered necessary for the development of a legitimate and stable democratic infrastructure in India (in 'Foreword' to Weiner 1962). More importantly, they have been instrumental in the creation of the constitutional provisions for special dispensation, otherwise known as the reservation policy. While these are certainly major gains, the movements have also had certain undesirable consequences.

Overall social equality, that is, equal rights for goods and services of society, and equal treatment in social life (say, in the sense of formal equality as enshrined in the Constitution) of individuals irrespective of caste and community, was neither a central issue nor an underlying motivation for these movements.

As the movements articulated only specific group interests, the government's response was only to satisfy such limited interests and not those of society at large, cutting across castes and communities. These processes of articulating group interests and responding to such interests have made Indian politicians and administrators 'myopic' so that they see the 'Indian road to equality'[20] merely through castes and communities. This has vitiated the philosophy underlying the reservation policy which is to equip the historically disabled bottom groups with the necessary material and moral conditions for enabling them to compete in the opportunity structure of society on an equal footing with the advanced groups.

The reservation policy as it operates now is mere tokenism, is intrinsically concessionist, and falls far short of the needs for creating

the conditions necessary for ushering in equality. Consequently, the spread effects of this policy have been minimal and its benefits have been concentrated on a fraction of the target population. This is evident from the data available for Tamil Nadu for the year 1980-82: Of the total BC students admitted to professional courses like engineering, medicine, and law, more than three-fourths were from a small number of the backward classes (34 out of 222 communities), accounting for only about two-fifths of the total BC population in the state. Of the total number of BC scholarships, the total amount of these scholarships, and candidates of all grades selected by the Public Service Commission (PSC), about two-thirds again went to this small number of BCs. Even within this small number, just about one-third of the total BC population had cornered as much as two-thirds of the BC admissions to the professional courses, and more than half of the scholarships, scholarship amounts, and selections by the PSC (see Radhakrishnan 1989:1268).

Given this skewed distribution of the reservation benefits, the compartmental reservation introduced in response to the Vanniyar agitations is not likely to offer any succour to the numerous minuscule groups like barbers, washermen, and 'denotified tribes', which are clubbed along with the Vanniyars as 'most backward'. Therefore, the next phase of the backward class movements should logically be the organized agitations of these non-beneficiary groups against the dominance of the Vanniyars in the reservation scheme, and for exclusive reservation to themselves.

Whether this is likely to take place is a moot issue; more so in the light of the Supreme Court rulings of 16 November 1992 in what is known as the Mandal case, limiting overall reservation (for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes combined) to 50 per cent, and directing the elimination of the 'creamy layer' from the listed backward classes.

The Tamil Nadu government has tried to circumvent the court rulings through the Tamil Nadu Reservation Act, passed by the Tamil Nadu Assembly in December 1993 under section 31(c) of the Constitution, which, under political pressure, and for political expediency, obtained the President's assent in July 1994 and was

included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution in August 1994 under Article 31B. But the legality of both the Act and its inclusion in the Ninth Schedule has been challenged in the Supreme Court as violative of the basic structure of the Constitution. If the Supreme Court decides to strike down the Act, which is most likely, the government will be compelled to reduce its overall reservation to 50 per cent. This may reduce the reservation quota for the Most Backward Classes. If the really backward among them, especially the numerically smaller groups, have to benefit from this change, it will again be by adhering to the Supreme Court directive to eliminate the creamy layer.

Notes

1. For a typology of backward classes and their movements, see Rao 1979. For backward classes as British educational, and as socio-historical categories, see Radhakrishnan 1990.
2. The Panchalar and Visvakulotharana are among the five artisan castes otherwise known as Kammalar or Viswa Brahmins. For more details, see GO 4282 Revenue (Confidential), 30 October 1896; and GOs 970-71 Public, 20 July 1897.
3. The earliest figures on matriculates are for 1858, and those on BA graduates for 1861. The increase of matriculates/BA graduates among the non-Brahmin Hindus was from 624/7 in 1858/1861 to 22,611/3,191 in 1917, with 13,032/2,103 during 1901-17; while that among Brahmins was from 1,385/28 in 1858/1861 to 60,080/10,202 in 1917, with 34,123/6,197 during 1901-17. Data for matriculates is from the Public Instruction Reports of Madras Presidency from 1858 to 1917, and from Government of Madras 1874:195. That for BA graduates is from the Madras University Calendar corrected up to the end of 1921.
4. For this manifesto, see Irschick 1969:358-67; Saraswathi 1974:199-209.
5. See Public Department GOs 613 of 16 September 1921, 658 of 15 August 1922, 855 of 3 August 1923, 76 of 6 February 1924, 733 of 3 August 1925, and 1071 of 4 November 1927.
6. The reference here is to the lower polluting castes and not to the higher polluting castes like the Tiyyas and Nadars. For more on the usage 'DCs' as 'Untouchables', see Radhakrishnan 1990.
7. See Public Department GOs 454 of 25 May 1922, 563 of 21 July 1923, 364 of 21 May 1924, 895 of 20 December 1924, 360 of 23 April 1927, and 524 of 9 June 1928.

8. The appellation 'SC' has to be understood against the demands by B. R. Ambedkar and other DC leaders before the Round Table Conferences for replacing the reference to 'Untouchables' as DCs by a more exclusive and less insulting term. See Radhakrishnan 1991.
9. This reservation was the result of the government's realization that the DC chances were seriously prejudiced by the inclusion of better-off communities like Jains, Parsees, Buddhists, and Arya Samajists in 'Others'. In 1934 they were clubbed with non-Brahmin Hindus. See GO 947 Public, 10 September 1934.
10. See Public Department GOs 2285 of 27 November 1937, 1117 of 30 June 1938, 201 of 25 January 1947, 1298 of 2 May 1947, and 2262 and 2264 of July 1947.
11. The reference here is to the settlement of September 1932 between Ambedkar and the caste-Hindu leaders, necessitated by Gandhi's 21-day 'fast unto death', protesting against the 'Communal Award' of August 1932, which granted the 'Untouchables' regular votes in the general electorates and additional separate electorates in areas of their concentration. Under the Poona Pact the 'Untouchables' lost their separate electorates for an increased number of seats in joint electorates.
12. See Public Department GOs 1151 of 27 June 1936, 2349 of 6 December 1937, 394 of 5 March 1938, 1829 of 5 November 1938, 1471 of 11 September 1939, 1251 of 22 April 1944, and 3437 of 21 November 1947.
13. For more on Viswa Brahmins, see Public Department GOs 103 of 26 January 1933, 617 of 24 July 1933, 123 of 9 February 1934, 795 of 21 May 1935, 1440 of 26 August 1936, 1572 of 28 September 1936, 1950 of 2 December 1936, and 388 of 24 February 1937.
14. For more on Vanniyars, see Public Department GOs 857 of 27 May 1935, 1530 of 19 September 1935, 1440 of 26 August 1936, 1532 of 12 September 1938, and 247 of 4 February 1940.
15. For more on the Backward Classes League, see Public Department GOs 838 of 9 August 1934, 850 of 27 May 1935, 2215 of 18 November 1937, 861 of 30 May 1939, 190 of 20 January 1944, 690 of 14 March 1945, and 929 of 7 April 1945; and GO 669 Education, 29 April 1944.
16. This Article empowered the state to make, notwithstanding the provisions of Articles 15(1) and 29(2), any special provisions for the advancement of the socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, or for the SCs and STs.
17. Though the reservation for SCs and STs was fixed at 15 per cent in 1951, at the instance of the Government of India, in December 1954 it was increased to 16 per cent corresponding to their population of 16.4 per cent. See GO 2643 Public, 30 December 1954.
18. The Commission observed that in the late 1960s just nine out of the numerous BCs accounting for only about 11 per cent of the total BC population had

cornered much of the benefits available to the entire BC population. That is, 37 per cent of the non-gazetted and 48 per cent of the gazetted posts, 44 per cent of the engineering and 47 per cent of the medical college seats, and 34 per cent of the scholarships.

19. For a brief account of the politics of reservations in Tamil Nadu, see Radhakrishnan 1989.
20. For a discussion of the Indian experiment at bringing about an egalitarian social order in a society permeated by historically accumulated caste-based inequalities, see Srinivas 1960.

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BACKWARD CASTES AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN U.P. AND BIHAR

Meenakshi Jain

Despite the prominence that caste has gained in post-Independence India, the level of misunderstanding that prevails about it is truly amazing. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of the so-called backward castes. How an acutely caste-conscious society has reached a stage where most educated people are unable to even correctly place this category in the caste hierarchy is difficult to say. The existence of a widespread tendency to confuse the so-called backward castes (Shudras in traditional caste parlance, and Other Backward Classes in today's language of backwards and forwards) with 'Untouchables' (the Schedule Castes, Harijans) cannot be denied, even though the two caste categories have remained mutually antagonistic in large parts of the Indian countryside.

The seeds of this confusion can perhaps be traced to the period of British rule. Towards the beginning of this century British administrators began to use the term 'backward classes' for the Shudra caste group on the ground that it had failed to take to Western education and government employment in a significant way. This immediately led to the Shudras (the fourth varna of the Hindu social order) being confused with Harijans, for centuries the epitome of suppression and backwardness. In a bid to clarify the situation the term 'other backward classes' began to be employed for the Shudras.

Subsequently the Scheduled Castes and Tribes began to be referred to as the 'depressed classes'. But the confusion persisted (Galanter 1984:154-161). It may be added here that the term 'backward classes' is an administrative euphemism for the backward castes, that is, the Shudras. The Backward Classes Commissions set up by the Indian government after Independence also used the term backward classes for 'castes whose ritual rank and occupational status was above the Untouchables but in the lower reaches of the caste order of traditional society' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:54).

The British contribution apart, the lack of clarity about the backward castes can also be explained by the amorphous nature of this category. While the terms Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas bring distinct, if stereotyped, images to mind, the phrase 'backward castes' draws a blank. As Prof M. N. Srinivas notes, the term Shudra 'spans such a wide cultural and structural arch as to be almost meaningless. There are at one extreme the dominant, landowning, peasant castes which wield power and authority over local Vaishyas and Brahmins, whereas at the other extreme are the poor, near-Untouchable groups living just above the pollution line. The category also includes the many artisan and servicing castes . . .' (Srinivas 1966:10).

In concrete terms then, it is possible to divide the Shudra category into two clearly identifiable sub-categories — what are called the Upper Shudras and the Lower Shudras. In North India, the area with which this paper is concerned, the Upper Shudras comprise such economically powerful and politically aggressive groups as the Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis and Koiris while the Lower Shudras include the humble Hajjam, Kumbhar, Lohar, Teli, Tatwa, Dhanuk and Mallah (Frankel 1989:54). The Jats are not officially included in the backward classes list but regard themselves as the leaders of the backward classes.

It is the inclusion of all these heterogeneous groups within the Shudra category that has made for its large size and has enabled the leaders of the backward castes (that is the Upper Shudras) to press hard their claim for special status in the post-Independence period. They have alleged that the Congress party (via the Nehru model of

development which served as its ideological framework) has been instrumental in empowering a small group of upper castes, a pro-industry group, at the expense of the rural majority. This has left the backward castes with no option but to launch an all-out attack on the Congress system and all that it stands for.

Upper caste dominance in the Congress party is a fact difficult to deny. Stanley Kochanek's study shows that 46 per cent of the ministers in the union cabinet were Brahmins and that the so-called forward castes (Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas) together constituted 46 per cent of the members of the Congress Parliamentary Party as against the 10 per cent Shudras (Kochanek 1968:386). Nor was the situation any different at the state level. In the 1962 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, for example, almost 63 per cent of the Congress MLAs belonged to the élite castes and only 6.8 per cent to the backward castes (Burger 1969:53-55). In the same year the Congress ministry in Bihar had 58 per cent cabinet ministers from the forward castes and 8 per cent from the backward castes (Blair 1980).

But it would be incorrect to conclude that upper caste dominance reduced the Congress to a casteist organization. Indeed, upper caste dominance can be largely explained by the fact that these castes were the first to take to Western education and consequently the first to espouse the cause of freedom. More important, throughout its history the Congress remained a party of reform and consensus. While at the centre Nehru did indeed pursue a strategy of industrial growth with an emphasis on the public sector and import substitution, it is also a fact that he increasingly yielded control over state governments to rural interests which enabled them to allocate resources and control policy implementation for the agricultural sector and rural society in ways favourable to them. Thus, while the Planning Commission proposed, state governments disposed.

I

Under Nehru's leadership the Congress party was also instrumental in bringing about a veritable revolution in the countryside. Through

its land reform legislation it was primarily responsible for dispossessing the big zamindars and empowering the backward castes, allegations of Congress' anti-rural bias notwithstanding. The reforms created a substantial class of medium-sized owner-cultivators, many of whom belonged to the backward castes. As Rudolph and Rudolph point out, 'unlike large landowners whose origins and resources are located in the history of the British Raj, self-employed cultivators are largely the product of post-Independence agrarian policies' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:354).

The first wave of land reforms that began in the 1950s aimed primarily at conferring ownership rights on erstwhile tenants. As a consequence, the centre of power shifted from the feudal landlords to the 'market-oriented independent cultivators'. It has been estimated that as a result of the zamindari abolition laws, roughly 20 million tenants became owners. Tenancy fell from 60 to 25 per cent and the percentage of owner-cultivators increased from 40 to 75. Despite charges of large-scale evasion and tenant eviction, the state acquired about 14 million acres for distribution in addition to large amounts of privately held grazing, forest and waste land (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:315).

In caste terms the principal losers in northern India were Rajput-Thakurs and to a lesser extent Bania, Kayastha and Muslim landlords. The main beneficiaries were the erstwhile tenants among Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis, Koiris, that is, those belonging to the upper strata of the Shudra castes.

After cornering the benefits of this first wave of agrarian legislation, these groups took the lead in blocking all subsequent attempts at reform designed to benefit the marginal farmers and the landless who usually also belonged to castes and groups further down the hierarchy. Under Chaudhury Charan Singh's leadership they opposed the Congress party's Nagpur resolution (1959) which sought to collectivize agriculture, as well as subsequent attempts in the 1960s and 1970s to lower the land ceiling. Charan Singh held that such moves would reduce 'efficiency in agricultural production'. He argued that self-sufficient peasant proprietors (i.e., Jats, Yadavs,

Kurmis, Koiris) be allowed to retain holdings of 30 acres (Hasan 1989:182).

Rudolph and Rudolph have estimated that by 1970-72, middle peasants, or in their terminology, 'bullock capitalists', were probably more numerous, and controlled more land (34 per cent controlled 51 per cent land) than any of the other three agrarian classes: the landless — (27 per cent controlled 0 per cent land); the small holders (33 per cent controlled 10 per cent land) and the large holders (six per cent controlled 39 per cent land) (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 52). 'Bullock capitalists', independent agricultural producers, middle peasants, backward classes, backward castes, intermediate castes are all overlapping terms. They refer primarily to those members of the Shudra castes who are self-employed, operate holdings between 2.5 to 15 acres, use a pair of bullocks and 'the new inputs associated with the green revolution'. To quote Rudolph and Rudolph, 'overlapping bullock capitalists, an economic category, were the "backward classes" (read castes), a status group that came of age politically in the seventies' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:50). On the other hand, between 1954-55 and 1971-72, the proportion of large landowner households and the amount of land they controlled fell from nine to six per cent and from 53 to 39 per cent respectively (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:345) making for 'a real decline in the aggregate in the proportions of large landowners and the amount of land they control'.

A still clearer picture of the magnitude of the change comes from the premier state of the Hindi heartland, Uttar Pradesh. The principal backward castes here, the Yadavs, Kurmis, Lodhas and Gujars controlled six per cent of the zamindari rights in the state in the pre-Independence period. After Independence, however, 20 per cent of the land came to be owned by these four castes (together they comprise 15 per cent of the state's population). Taking all the backward castes of UP, their share increased from eight per cent zamindari rights prior to Independence to control over 38 per cent of the land after Independence (Hasan 1989:197).

Among the upper castes, Brahmins more or less held on to their earlier position. (They were never a major landlord group in the

state.) Thakurs, however, suffered a big setback. They controlled 34 per cent of the zamindari rights in the period before Independence but their share of land fell to 19 per cent after Independence. Clearly they were major victims of the Congress party's drive towards economic equality (Hasan 1989:197).

II

The displacement of the large landowners by middle farmers may be accurately described as one of the most significant developments of the post-Independence period. The middle farmers today constitute the most powerful group in the countryside economically as well as politically. They have more voters than any other agrarian class taken by itself — about 25 per cent of the total population (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:550) — and have emerged as the principal spokesmen of agrarian interests. But agrarian interests for them remain confined to the interests of middle farmers which explains why their major demands have been remunerative prices and lower input costs (and lately, administrative jobs via the Mandal Commission).

The increasing economic clout of the middle farmers can be judged from the fact that under their pressure investment in agriculture, especially under the heads of power and irrigation, was raised from 36 per cent in the First Plan to 58 per cent in the Fifth (Hasan 1989:184). The Sixth and Seventh Plan outlays under this head also crossed the 50 per cent mark. Allocations to industrial development on the other hand, reached a high of six per cent in the Second Plan and thereafter fluctuated between three and four per cent of the public expenditure. In the field of community development and social services (whose principal beneficiaries are the landless) allocations declined from 27.5 per cent in the Second Plan to 13.7 per cent in the Fifth and Sixth Plans (Frankel 1989:98). Furthermore, from 1964-65 to 1978-79 the agricultural index increased from 147 to 198 largely due to the tremendous increase in wheat cultivation in Punjab, Haryana and western UP in the wake of the Green

Revolution. By 1977, 70 per cent of the wheat-growing areas and 35 per cent of the rice-growing areas were under high-yielding varieties (HYV) (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:323). This should suffice to give some idea of the magnitude of economic change brought about in the countryside.

What is more, despite the pressing need for more revenue, no government in New Delhi has had the courage to impose an agricultural income tax. The Congress government which made a brief attempt in 1973 to impose wholesale state trading in food had to retreat in the face of stiff opposition from the agricultural lobby. An examination of the hold of the middle farmer over cooperatives (susceptible to the influence of the powerful agricultural castes) would be equally revealing. In 1979-80, small and marginal cultivators (with five acres and less) who comprised 49 per cent of all households, received only 34 per cent of the cooperative bank loans whereas those with five acres and above (32 per cent households) received 62 per cent of the loans. If one also keeps in mind the high rate of non-recovery of loans (in June 1978 overdue loans in cooperatives and commercial banks were 42 and 50 per cent of the demand) one can get some idea of the concentration of resources taking place in the countryside (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:373-74).

Politically, the rise of the middle farmer was the single most important cause of the decline of the Congress in North India. Despite its electoral dependence on the forward castes, scheduled castes, tribes and minorities (Gopal Krishna 1967:55), till 1967 the party was also successful in incorporating sections of the backward castes even though they did not serve as its 'vote bank'. After all, Charan Singh remained an important leader and the pre-eminent spokesman of rural interests in the Congress until his decision to quit the party in 1967. It is true that the Congress did not concede primacy to these newly-mobilized groups (Charan Singh left the party on being denied Chief Ministership [Hasan 1989:180]) but it did not close its doors to them either.

The middle peasant challenge emerged clearly for the first time in 1967 when the Congress party lost power at the state level in all

North Indian states and middle peasant leaders took over as Chief Ministers in Haryana (Rao Birendra Singh), Uttar Pradesh (Chaudhury Charan Singh), Madhya Pradesh (G. N. Singh) and Bihar (B. P. Mandal). A study of the composition of these non-Congress governments would reveal the magnitude of the backward caste revolt. Backward castes constituted 30 per cent of the ministers in Charan Singh's government and 34 per cent of the B. P. Mandal ministry in Bihar. Forty-five per cent of the ministers in Rao Birendra Singh's government in Haryana were Jats (Jain 1988:254).

Despite a brief effort by Mrs Gandhi (in the post 1969 split period) to accommodate these castes, they remained basically outside the Congress after 1967. Their growing political assertiveness was the major cause of the Congress party's inability to recover its hold on the Hindi heartland. In the 1971 parliamentary elections, Congress won only one per cent more of its seats from this region than in 1967. In 1980, its percentage of seats from this region declined to 42, that is three per cent less than in 1967. Indeed, after 1967, southern and western India replaced the Hindi heartland as Congress bastions.

III

For a still clearer picture of the increasing political clout of the backward castes, one must turn to the states of UP and Bihar.

In Bihar the Upper Shudras, that is, the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koiris together constitute 19 per cent of the state's population. The total backward caste population in Bihar is estimated to be around 50 per cent. Yadavs are the largest single group comprising about 11 per cent of the population. The Scheduled Castes constitute 14 per cent of the population and the Scheduled Tribes nine per cent (Blair 1979:5).

From 1962 onwards (from which date figures are available) at no point has the representation of these castes in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha been less than their percentage of the population. If anything, Yadavs have been consistently over-represented. By 1967 itself they

had emerged as the second largest caste group in the Bihar Assembly, next only to the Rajputs. By 1977 they comprised 21 per cent of the legislature, that is almost twice their strength in the population (Blair 1980). The following years saw a further increase in the political might of the Yadavs, so much so that by the 1980 assembly elections they constituted the largest single caste group in the Bihar Assembly, a position they have since retained. In March 1985 as many as 41 Yadavs were elected to the Bihar Vidhan Sabha, an all-time record in the state's electoral history (Frankel 1989:119). In the May 1991 parliamentary elections, the three principal parties, the Janata Dal, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress allotted the highest number of tickets to candidates belonging to the backward castes (*Sunday Mail*, 5 May 1991).

Despite the upper caste orientation of the Bihar Congress, by 1957 and 1962, 22 per cent of the members of the Congress Legislature Party came from the Upper Shudras, evidence of the party's assimilative pull. Moreover, in 1955, 20 per cent of the members of the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee came from this group (Frankel 1989:87).

An examination of the share of the Upper Shudras in ministerial posts is equally enlightening. In 1963, the Congress Chief Minister, K. B. Sahay, in a bid to bolster his position, entered into an alliance with the Yadav leader, Ram Lakhan Singh. Consequently, the share of the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koiris in the 1963 state ministry increased to 20 per cent from less than 10 per cent previously (Frankel 1989:87). From 1963 till the formation of the Jagannath Mishra government in 1980, the representation of the Upper Shudras in Congress governments never went below 20 per cent. In the Karpoori Thakur ministry of 1977 their share went up to as high as 38 per cent (Frankel 1989:106-108, 118). Moreover, in the last two decades Yadavs alone have captured the chief ministership of the state no less than three times (B. P. Mandal, D. R. Rai, Laloo Prasad Yadav).

The Upper Shudras have so far shown reluctance to share power with their weaker brethren (the Lower Shudras who, in fact, comprise 40 per cent of the backward caste population). This is to be concluded from the fact that representation of the lower backward castes in the

state legislature (till 1977 when figures are available) never crossed four to five per cent. Till 1983 their share in government posts never exceeded seven per cent even under backward caste governments. It was only in the 1985 Congress ministry of Bindeshwari Dubey that they achieved 12 per cent representation in the government (Frankel 1989:118, Blair i980).

Simultaneously, Brahmin representation in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha started registering a downward trend. Beginning with a high of 17 per cent in 1962, their strength declined to seven per cent in the 1977 assembly elections held soon after the lifting of the national Emergency. Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayasthas were, however, able to hold on to their respective positions (Blair 1980).

Apart from their success at the Vidhan Sabha and the ministerial level in Bihar, the leaders of the backward castes have also been successful in capturing power at the panchayat level in villages where they command numerical superiority. Here also the traditional Brahmin leadership has been pushed aside (Frankel 1989:96).

IV

In Uttar Pradesh the backward castes comprise around 42 per cent of the population with Yadavs heading the list at nine per cent (Hasan 1989:154). Here, attempts at the political mobilization of the backward castes began soon after Independence. By the early 1960s, the Socialist Party under the leadership of Rammanohar Lohia had emerged as the principal spokesman of these castes. Thereafter the mantle fell on Charan Singh (Hasan 1989:178-79).

By 1967, representation of the Upper Shudras, that is the Yadavs, Kurmis, Lodhas and Gujars in the state assembly was proportionate to their strength in the total population. It reached a high of 23 per cent in 1974 but fell by almost 10 per cent in 1980, the last year for which data is available (Hasan 1989:176). Despite the fact that the top leadership position in the Congress Legislature Party (CLP) never fell into their hands, in 1974 Yadavs, Kurmis, Lodhas and Gujars comprised 15 per cent of the CLP (Hasan 1989:186). In

fact, for several decades after Independence, the Congress party remained the principal vehicle through which the backward castes in UP sought political mobility. Their quest for independent political power took concrete form with the formation in 1969 of the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD), the party *par excellence* of the backward castes. Thereafter the backward castes became increasingly strident in their opposition to Congress rule. Between 1967 and 1974 the percentage of upper castes in the Vidhan Sabha fell from 40 to 37 per cent, while that of the peasant castes increased from 20 to 30 per cent (Hasan 1989:185). According to available studies, the BLD (in its various incarnations) received the bulk of its support from Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis and Koiris (Frankel 1977, Brass 1981). Its victory in the 1977 Assembly elections (as a major constituent of the Janata Party) was widely perceived as the victory of the backward castes at the cost of the upper castes.

V

The increasing political assertiveness of the leaders of the backward castes coupled with the conviction that they were cornering all the benefits of development in the countryside led Mrs Gandhi to adopt what has been described as 'a pro-poor agricultural strategy'. In addition to 'increased ad hoc transfer payments' by the Centre to the state governments for famine and drought relief, the government also adopted programmes 'specifically targeted to employment and asset creation for poor constituencies' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987:325-328). These included the Small Farmer Development Agency (SFDA), the Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourers scheme (MFALs), the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP), and the Crash Rural Employment Scheme (CRES) among others (Brass 1990:226-268). The new land legislation of 1972 which reduced the land ceiling to 18 acres, the state takeover of the wholesale wheat trade, and the efforts to redistribute surplus land among the landless, were all seen as part of the overall thrust against the middle castes.

But this attempt to circumvent the backward castes did not succeed. As partners of the Janata coalition in 1977, they finally succeeded in installing a government committed to their well-being at the Centre. The Janata government, under pressure from wheat and cane producers in North India to subsidize commercial agriculture, ordered state governments to abolish all existing levies and taxes on agricultural inputs. Further, the Agricultural Prices Commission for the first time accepted the parity principle (parity between prices of inputs and procurement prices) put forth by the powerful agricultural interests (Hasan 1989:166). In addition, investment in the agricultural sector was also raised above investment in industry and a Backward Classes Commission constituted to recommend measures for the betterment of the backward castes. But fissures within the Janata Party ensured that the duration of the first non-Congress government at the Centre remained a limited one.

The brief tenure of the first pro-backward caste government at the Centre as well as that of the second one headed by V. P. Singh, coupled with the short lifespan of similar governments in the states (the various United Front governments of 1967-69, and subsequently the Janata Party governments of 1977 and the Janata Dal governments of 1989), has had important implications for the Indian political system. Though major sections of these castes have since the 1960s sought political power outside the Congress party, they have been unable to throw up a coherent and viable alternative. This failure becomes all the more glaring given the numerical strength of these castes in the so-called Hindi belt. Harry Blair has, for example, estimated that roughly 50 per cent of the total population of Bihar falls in the backward classes category (Blair 1980).

Despite their determination to seize political power, the backward castes remain fragmented castewise, regionwise and languagewise. (This probably accounts for the success of the Congress party in winning over sections of the backward castes.) For the first few decades after Independence, the Jats were the undisputed leaders of the backward castes. But in recent years they have faced increasing challenge from the Yadavs. The split in the Lok Dal following the death of Chaudhury Charan Singh must be viewed essentially as a

Yadav revolt against Jat leadership. A study of the division in the UP Legislative Party would show that only five of the 18 Yadav Lok Dal MLAs continued to support Charan Singh's successor, Ajit Singh. On the other hand, not a single Jat MLA deserted Ajit Singh (Jain 1987). Since Charan Singh's death the Jats themselves seem to be in disarray with Ajit Singh, Devi Lal and Mahinder Singh Tikait being the principal contenders for their loyalty.

The determination of the backward castes to seize power together with the internal contradictions and struggles within their alliance system has thrown the politics of the entire northern region into turmoil. For while Yadavs rebel against Jats, Kurmis challenge Yadavs, and Lower Shudras turn against Upper Shudras, the backward castes as a whole refuse to align with any set-up that does not concede them total supremacy. Though not coherent enough to capture power on their own, they are powerful enough to prevent others from forming a rival stable order.

Conclusion

Contrary to the general impression that the backward castes belong to the deprived sections of Hindu society, few groups in independent India have made progress on a scale comparable to these castes. At least since the 1960s the backward castes, or more specifically the upper sections of the backward, have been key players in the politics of northern India. Despite some attempts to accommodate these castes in the Congress, they have been steadfast in their search for an independent political identity. But conflicts within this middle caste coalition highlight another important feature of the Indian political reality. Even though these castes have complementary interests, hierarchical considerations remain as important for leaders of the peasant communities as for the twice-born. It is difficult for a Jat, for example, to accept an Ahir or a Gujar as his leader. The reason for this is that in the old Brahminical social hierarchy that he is challenging as far as his own social status is concerned, he is a shade higher than the Ahir or Gujar. If this is so, it follows that the

middle order cannot in the long run produce a coherent political organization of its own. It must remain fragmented and unable to consolidate its hold on power. In contrast to the Congress system which sought, however imperfectly, to spread the benefits of development to all sections of society, the chief characteristic of a middle caste dominated political order is its obsessive preoccupation with itself.

Postscript (February 1995)

As one looks at developments over the last five years, what strikes one most is the large political space the OBCs have occupied. It is difficult to conceive of a set-up in Lucknow or Patna that does not concede them a position of some prominence. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with its supposed upper caste orientation, fielded a Lodha as chief minister when it formed the government in Uttar Pradesh. The Congress too has continued with its efforts to come to terms with the power of the OBCs. In the 1995 Bihar Vidhan Sabha elections, 77 of the 324 seats it contested were allotted to candidates belonging to this caste cluster *(The Times of India,* 24 January 1995).

The other development of note is the emergence of an alliance between the backward castes, minorities and Dalits in place of the earlier one between upper castes, minorities and Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Muslim disenchantment with the Congress had become visible in the late Sixties as the trauma of Partition receded and a new middle class emerged within the community. The family planning programme pursued during the national Emergency hastened the process. Things came to a breaking point in the Nineties primarily over developments in Ayodhya. Under the leadership of Mulayam Singh Yadav in UP and Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar, the OBCs have emerged as the principal contenders for minority votes. In the 1995 assembly elections the Janata Dal, the party *par excellence* of the backward castes in Bihar allotted 33 of the 260 seats it contested to Muslims (*The Times of India,* 1 February 1995). As for the Dalits, despite the contradictions inherent in their alliance with the OBCs,

the prospect of power has propelled them in that direction. The OBCs and Dalits have together formed the government in UP (*The Times of India,* 1 February 1995).

Having said this, one must immediately begin with the qualifications. The rise of the backward castes has brought to the fore the intense struggles within the coalition and its inability to present a coherent alternative. As Yadavs challenged Jat leadership in UP in the 1980s, so Kurmis have staged a major protest against Yadav rule in Bihar. Explaining the genesis of the Kurmi revolt, their leader Nitish Kumar said in a recent interview, 'The entire backward castes along with Muslims voted for the Janata Dal. Was there any need to search for a core group among the OBCs? Laloo is a casteist, a neo-Brahimin who wants to make his caste—the Yadavs—the nucleus of his support, and others are simply doomed to be on the periphery.' Kumar further resented Laloo Yadav's attempts to project the Muslim-Yadav (MY) alliance to the exclusion of the other backward castes (*The Pioneer,* 5 February 1995).

A look at the list of candidates fielded by the Janata Dal for the 1995 elections to the Bihar legislature lends credence to these charges. The largest number of tickets have been allotted to Yadavs. Of a total 260 seats contested, as many as 72 have gone to candidates belonging to this caste category while the Kurmis have had to be content with just 12 tickets (*The Times of India*, 1 February 1995).

The formation of the Samata Party is evidence of the split in the OBC camp. The party has only 11 Yadavs in its list of candidates, the lowest perhaps for any party in Bihar (*The Hindustan Times*, 5 February 1995). Even the Congress list provides for 28 Yadavs. Interestingly, the upper castes too are said to be drawn towards the Samata Party though it is headed by a Kurmi and remains largely a lower backward caste phenomenon. Perhaps we have come full circle. Perhaps we are witnessing the birth of a new coalition—the upper castes and lower OBCs sharing power according to the new political realities.

Developments in UP point in a similar direction. The untenability of the Samajwadi-Bahujan Samaj Party alliance becomes more evident each passing day, and the greatest challenge to it comes

from the Lodha-led and upper caste supported BJP.

Finally, surprising though it may seem, the OBC-minority alliance has not led to the empowerment of the Muslims. Both Yadav chief ministers have projected themselves (and are perceived by the minorities) as defenders of Muslim interests. But the fact remains that during their tenure Muslim representation in government has reached an all-time low. Perhaps the next threat to the backward caste coalition will come from this quarter.

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BUDDHISM, CONVERSION AND IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF VILLAGE MAHARS

Neera Burra

Introduction

The Mahars are one of the major Scheduled Caste groups in Maharashtra. They were numerically the largest Scheduled Caste group before their conversion to Buddhism in 1956. Mahars are found in every village. There is a popular saying that goes: '*Jethe gao, tethe maharwada*' or 'wherever there is a village, there is a maharwada' (living quarters of the Mahars) (Zelliot 1969a:17). They were part of the system of balutedars (village servants who received grain and some old clothes from the villagers as baluta or payment for services rendered) (Zelliot 1979a:30). The Mahars had to perform certain functions for the government. For their official duties, they were compensated by watans (hereditary estates or offices), which took the form of grants of land either entirely free of assessment or subject to an annual reduced assessment or cash payment from the government treasury or both. The official work included taking government dues to the sub-treasury, carrying village records and mail to the taluka (an administrative unit of a district) office; accompanying village officers and touring officers during crop and boundary-marks inspection, accompanying police patils (village

functionaries looking after law and order) on night-watch duty, publicizing government orders by beat of drum, etc. But not all Mahars in a village did maharki, as these official duties were called. Most of them were involved in gaonki, a term used to describe the role of the Mahar as the servant of the village. Amongst the functions of a Mahar doing gaonki were cutting wood for the villagers, taking wood to the cremation ground, taking messages of birth and death, accompanying a marriage party from one village to another, removing dead cattle from houses and cleaning wells. There were, however, some Mahars who did neither maharki nor gaonki but were agriculturists.

The socio-economic status of the Mahars was extremely low. Their touch was defiling and the Mahars lived isolated in the maharwada, always separated from the living areas of the caste Hindus.

The position of the Mahars was particularly bad because of the nature of their occupation which brought them into constant contact with caste Hindus and this contact reinforced their low social position. Other Scheduled Castes had hereditary artisanal occupations which made contact with caste Hindus somewhat limited. The Mahars had no autonomous economic base and their fortune was tied to the village (Bhatt 1941:8; Zelliot 1969a:132; and *Census of India* 1931 VIII, 1933:251).

Dr B. R. Ambedkar, framer of India's Constitution, was indisputably one of the greatest leaders of the Scheduled Castes in India. In his quest to emancipate them from the oppression of Hinduism, he considered conversion to Islam, Christianity and Sikhism. These were eventually rejected in favour of Buddhism (*Bombay Chronicle*, 6 May 1936, p. 4; *Bombay Chronicle*, 7 May 1936, p. 4). Another theme that ran persistently through his speeches and writings during this period was the importance of education and political power to improve their position. About the means of salvation for the Untouchables, Dr Ambedkar said in 1933 that '. . . the surest way for their salvation lies in higher education, higher employment and better ways of earning a living' (quoted in Keer 1954:228-29). An important consideration in his choice of a religion

to convert to was that the constitutional guarantees promised by the Poona Pact to the Scheduled Castes would not be lost. Suffice it to say here that Dr Ambedkar was less swayed by the metaphysics of religious belief than down-to-earth considerations of *realpolitik*.[2]

In October 1956, Dr Ambedkar led a mass conversion movement of about half a million people in Nagpur to Buddhism. He took *diksha* (vows) at the hands of the oldest Buddhist bhikshu (monk) at that time in India, and then asked the people gathered to repeat the tisarana (the three refuges of the Buddha): the dhamma (duty), the sangha (organization) and the panchshila (five Buddhist moral affirmations for laymen) and twenty-two vows in Marathi (Zelliot 1977:128; *Bombay Chronicle*, 15 October 1956, p. 1; *Bharat Jyoti*, 14 October 1956, p. 8; and *Bharat Jyoti*, 15 October 1956, p. 1).

The neo-Buddhist movement, as this has come to be called, was a conversion movement primarily of the Mahars of Maharashtra, the community to which Ambedkar belonged. The other major Scheduled Caste groups, the Mangs and the Chambhars, were alienated from the Mahars over, amongst other things, the issue of conversion as well (Ven. Mahathera 1969:77, Patwardhan 1973: 158; Zelliot 1966a:58, 166b:192; Keer 1954:262; *Bombay Chronicle*, 15 August 1936, p. 8). There were, however, Untouchable communities in other parts of India who converted to Buddhism following Ambedkar, particularly the Jatavas of Agra (Lynch [1969] 1974).

This paper is based on fieldwork for a doctoral thesis carried out in village Ambegaon (a pseudonym) in Beed district of Maharashtra. The area of study was restricted. The fieldwork was completed in 1983. It looks at the ways in which Buddhism is understood and practised by the ordinary Mahar in the village. The paper also studies the contrasting perceptions of rural Mahars. It seeks to document the different ways by which rural and urban Mahars have followed the basic principles of Ambedkar's philosophy. In the urban context, it led to an overt and explicit denunciation of Hinduism. In the rural context, circumstances led to a different behavioural pattern. There is no attempt at generalization though perhaps Ambegaon is very much like any other Maharashtrian village. The Dalit (oppressed)

consciousness is high in this area because of caste riots over a demand made several years ago to change the name of the leading University of the area at Aurangabad to Ambedkar University. There was a feeling — expressed to me by urban Mahars — that rural Mahars should not be taken too seriously as their understanding was limited both by poverty and ignorance. Several rural Mahars, on the other hand, reacted strongly to such condescension and felt that the way in which they looked at Buddhism and Hinduism was rooted in the social reality of their situation. There was a wide difference in the perception of the social reality of the Mahars. It is pertinent to note that the bulk of the Mahar population still resides in the villages of Maharashtra.

Buddhism and Its Impact: The Prevailing Urban Perspective

A commonly held view on the impact of the conversion to Buddhism is that it has led to a great psychological release for the former Untouchables. This view is particularly endorsed by Zelliot (1977: 133, 137-138), whose evidence is based on interviews with some Dalit leaders. She emphasizes this point and refers to the impact of conversion in the following way: 'Contemporary observers report a general elation among the Mahar community — a sudden sense of psychological freedom among students, a gallant mood in the villages, a ceremonious discarding of god images in the river, a pious closing of the home-brew stills in the slums of Bombay.' She goes so far as to suggest that the psychological impact of Buddhism and the effect of the new identity can best be gauged from Buddhist literature, writings and songs. She cites a song written by Waman Kardak, a Buddhist singer, as epitomizing the feeling of psychological release. Developing her argument, she quotes a Dalit writer, Gangadhar Pantavane, as saying: 'Bhimrao (Ambedkar) has placed us in the lap of a life-giving religion and so has awakened psychological independence . . . . This is the religion of Gautam, who with love won the world, and the spine of this religion is humanity.' According to Zelliot, 'For Waman Kardak, an uneducated but highly skilled

and professional performer, and for Gangadhar Pantavane, a Professor of Marathi in Milind College and a writer and an editor, the profoundly satisfying psychological meaning of the conversion is clear.'

Eleanor Zelliot (1966b:205) coined the term 'pali-ization' with reference to the conversion of Mahars to Buddhism. Says Zelliot, 'The conversion continues the "purifying process" that has been part of the movement all along, a "Pali-ization" rather than a "Sansksritization" of practices, to use the Buddhist equivalent for M. N. Srinivas' useful word for the emulation of high caste practices.' She emphasizes (*ibid.*) in no uncertain terms that 'the conversion was accompanied by the throwing out of the Hindu gods from the Maharwada . . .'. Sunanda Patwardhan (1973:153), another sociologist, shares the same views.

Zelliot's observations are also endorsed by yet another sociologist, Jayshree Gokhale-Turner. In an unpublished paper, she reiterates the theme of, and emphasizes the aspect of the Mahars' pride in Buddhism.[3]

Owen Lynch, probably the most perceptive amongst the sociologists dealing with this issue, while studying the conversion of the Jatavas of Agra to Buddhism, has a different perspective. He describes Dr Ambedkar's conversion movement as 'saintly politics'. Says Lynch ([1969] 1974:143), 'Ambedkar well knew that religion was suffused into every nook and cranny of Indian society and that the mind of the masses had not yet learned to distinguish that which is Caesar's from that which is God's. He therefore turned to "religiofication" — the art of turning practical purposes into holy causes. Buddhism is a political religion which the Jatav masses can respond to. It pours the new wine of political modernity into the old bottles of religious tradition. It was a stroke of genius, whether conscious or not, for Ambedkar to define the roles of a Buddhist in virtually the same terms as those of a citizen of democratic India. The inter-changeability of these two statuses allowed for an appeal to both the traditional and the secular minded among the Jatavas; yet, both could work for the same revolutionary goals.'

In Agra, Lynch points out that conversion has not led to a 'quantum

break with the past'. His explanation for this phenomenon is that 'the Jatavas can maintain Buddhism as a system of belief and Hinduism as a system of rite and ritual, because between them there is little overlap' (*ibid*:160). He however qualifies his statement by saying (*ibid*:160, 162), 'In this sense the Jatavas are unlike the Mahars of Maharashtra, who have attempted to adopt Buddhist rites and rituals as well as beliefs.'

Buddhism and Its Impact on Village Ambegaon

What was the place of Buddhism in the practice and belief of the village Mahar? In order to understand this, I asked a number of questions regarding caste, religion, untouchability, differences in Buddhism and Hinduism and so on of my Mahar, neo-Buddhist and caste Hindu respondents.

To a question as to what religion and caste the Mahars belonged to, the responses of the Mahars were as follows: out of a total of 102 respondents, 72 declared that they were Buddhists, nine that they were Mahars, 16 that they were Hindu Mahars and two that they were Buddhist Mahars, two that they were Harijan Buddhists and one that he was a Harijan.

When asked about their religion and caste, people tended to respond in a variety of ways. It is interesting to note that 76 people out of 102 mentioned the Buddhist aspect of their identity even though four of them qualified this with either the term Mahar or Harijan.

It has been observed before, and is certainly true, that when asked by a government functionary about their caste or religious affiliations, the response is usually that they are Mahars. This is for the good and simple reason that only Mahars and not Buddhists are entitled to privileges and concessions in the matters of representation in state and Central legislatures and education and employment given by the Central government. But when I, an outsider, asked them the same question, the response was quite different.

However, it would be simplistic to argue that these figures reveal an increasing attachment to Buddhism. Certainly, the answer to the

question changes depending on the situational context, the identity of the questioner and the purpose for which it is put. But beyond that, and more importantly, even if there is no identification with Buddhism as a religion — as I will try to show — it is interesting that there is a need to assert the Buddhist part of their identity. The reason for this, it is suggested, is that the self-perception of the Mahar has changed. When a Mahar says that he is a Buddhist, he does not imply that he has rejected Hinduism and become a follower of the Buddha. What he is trying to say is that his identity has changed: that he does not any longer regard himself as a member of the Untouchable community which is undeserving of human dignity and treatment. By implication, it is a call to others, particularly caste Hindus, to recognize the transformation within.

During the 1981 census operation, a complaint was lodged with the district authorities in Beed that the census enumerators, being caste Hindus, were persuading the Mahars to describe themselves as Hindus. The complaint, made by Dalit leaders, suggested that there was a conspiracy to reduce the numbers of Buddhists and thereby underestimate the success of the neo-Buddhist movement. Though I did not investigate the complaint, it might well have been true. But the numbers game — as played by both sides — does not really help us understand the truth.

To illustrate, when a Mahar meets another Mahar, he might well greet him by saying 'Ram Ram', a traditional caste Hindu greeting. But if a Mahar meets a caste Hindu, he will normally say 'Jai Bheem', a greeting only made by those who are Buddhists. The greeting 'Jai Bheem' is then a signal to the outside world to observe the change in identity. It is an assertion of the new identity, of the distinction between being a Scheduled Caste Mahar and a human being.

What was interesting about the responses to my question as to the differences perceived between Hinduism and Buddhism — if one discounted those who saw a difference but could not articulate what they meant — was that the focus of the replies pertained to the attitude of both religions towards untouchability. Eighteen-year-old Asha felt that there was too much untouchability in Hinduism. Raosaheb Gajeba, aged forty, believed that there was no pollution

in Buddhism. Bhagwan, aged thirty-two, felt that in Buddhism a man is viewed like a human being and this was not so in Hinduism.

I have, of course, only selectively reproduced certain responses but, in balance, it was overwhelmingly this type of response that could be said to be representative of the general attitude. What was noticeable was that neither the sex nor the age of the respondents seemed to have any correlation with the answer given.

I think it would be appropriate to conclude that, for the most part, Buddhism and Hinduism are contrasted for the Mahar by their respective approaches to caste and untouchability. It is in the context of social sanctions that the Mahars see the difference between Buddhism and Hinduism. Interestingly, this is the core of Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism.

I asked a question as to why some people say that they are Buddhists but have not taken the vows and also what the reasons for this could be. Below are selected responses dealing with attitudes towards the vows:

- We would have to pray all the time.
- We wouldn't be able to live by taking vows. Vows are very difficult to live by. If we were to take the diksha, we would have to live like bhikshus.
- We would not be allowed to eat meat after taking diksha.
- After taking diksha, people would have to wear only white clothes.
- We would have to give up all our gods and goddesses and that's why people don't like to take diksha.
- If I were to take diksha, I would have to live a straight life.

Interestingly, five people felt that only the better-off in their community could afford to take diksha because then they would have to give up their traditional occupations after taking the vows.

What does one make of these responses? For one thing, they suggest that there is no single interpretation of what it means to

become a Buddhist. The vows do not lay down that those who take them must pray all the time or that they shouldn't eat meat or should only wear white clothes or that the individual has to give up everything. That people believe that these are the implications of taking the vows brings out their ignorance of them which, in turn, is to be explained by the fact that there is no organization or mechanism to spread the meaning of the message of the Buddha. In fact, a few respondents said that they would take the vows if the bhikshus were to come. The bhikshus do not come because there is no systematic effort to recruit, train and send them out, as well as for other reasons elaborated earlier. By and large, the educated youth want to avail themselves of the facilities for education and better employment rather than give up these for an ascetic life.

The other facet of these responses is that some of them bring out how difficult it is to follow the vows. For example, the attachment to Hinduism does not easily allow people to throw out Hindu gods and goddesses from their homes; five people said that they would have to give up their traditional occupations if they took the vows and only the better-off could afford to do this; when one person said that taking the vows meant leading a straight life or when ten people said you couldn't then tell lies, what they meant was that the strict code enjoined by the vows was hard to follow in their circumstances.

In the absence of a machinery to get the religion — as interpreted by Ambedkar — internalized, ignorance, ambivalence and misinterpretation are widespread. All this would suggest that the spiritual content of the Buddha's message — again as interpreted by Ambedkar — has not gone home.

Although 70 out of 102 Mahar respondents claimed to be Buddhists, none of them had in fact taken the vows. I wanted to understand this contradiction. Many of the respondents, my interviews revealed, had a genuine, deep-seated anxiety that once they took the vows, they would not be able to live by them. It was not only that there was ignorance about what the vows actually enjoined — it is not as though they prohibit eating meat or bind one down to white clothes — but what is revealed is the general attitude towards oath-taking in rural society.

What came through in the interviews was the fear of consequences if the vows were taken but not obeyed. The possibility of adverse personal consequences — possibly of a dramatic kind — of the violation of the vow espoused could not be ruled out. In general, rural society is more superstitious about these matters, and the fear of the harmful effects of vows affirmed but denied in practice seemed to have kept many people away from the vows.

When I asked whether the religious practices of Mahars were the same as those of caste Hindus, all 102 respondents answered in the affirmative. But I then asked a further series of questions relating to specific areas of religious practice, and the answers given as well as my analysis of them are elaborated below.

I had begun my fieldwork with the expectation that I would not find any Hindu gods and goddesses in Mahar households. Both Zelliot and Patwardhan had referred to the significance of the Mahars having thrown these deities out when they embraced Buddhism. Zelliot goes so far as to say that '. . . it is true that no Mahar group attempted temple entry or introduced high caste religious practice into their customs after 1935, and the very rapidity of response to the actual conversion twenty years after the first announcement meant that a thorough acceptance of the idea had been secured in the minds of the Mahars' (Zelliot 1969a:227 and 1966a:59). However, it is not an exaggeration to say that every single household I visited had Hindu gods and goddesses installed in positions of respect.[4] But, in addition, there were also pictures of both the Buddha and Ambedkar. And when I asked specifically as to which gods were prayed to, 45 respondents said they prayed to all gods including Ambedkar; 30 classified Ambedkar as a god; 10 gave Buddha as their god; 12 people mentioned Hindu gods and goddesses such as Khandoba, Maruti, Devi and Ai and five did not specify.

From the figures above, it will be clear that at least 57 people said they worshipped Hindu gods. It is another matter that 45 of them also regarded Ambedkar as a god but what comes through loud and clear is that the presence of Hindu deities is pervasive both in the home and in the mind. What seems to have happened is that both the Buddha and Ambedkar have been annexed into the previous

religious universe and therefore 75 people out of 102 said they prayed to Ambedkar. Ten people prayed to the Buddha but this figure must be interpreted in the light of a statement made to me by almost everybody to the effect that there was no real difference between the Buddha and Ambedkar because the Buddha was the guru of Ambedkar.

The belief in Hindu gods was also acted upon in practice. When I asked how many made offerings — coconuts, flowers and fruits — to the gods, 78 people said they made offerings and 20 people said they didn't. The remaining four did not respond to the question. Not only was the vow to disregard Hindu gods being violated but 78 people out of 102 clearly indicated their continuing involvement with Hindu ritual practices. The attachment to Hinduism became apparent in response to a question as to how many people went on jatras (pilgrimages). Eighty-eight out of 102 told me that they did whereas only 10 said they didn't believe in pilgrimages. The remaining four said that they did not go on pilgrimages for lack of money.

One of the 22 vows of Buddhism says: 'I will never perform any shraaddha (ancestor propitiation) nor will I offer any pinda.' Another vow says: 'I will never get any Samskaar (traditional rites and duties) performed by Brahmins' (Zelliot 1977:128). I asked two separate questions in connection with these vows, one relating to belief and the other to practice. The answers contradicted each other but are nevertheless revealing. When I asked whether they believed in the theories of karma, dharma and the transmigration of the soul, 88 out of the 102 said they did not. Only four said that they did and 10 confessed ignorance about these theories. The fact that so many people answered in the negative about belief in three fundamental Hindu concepts would suggest an intellectual rejection of Hinduism. Yet it would be misleading to put such an interpretation upon these figures. The reason is that the answers relating to the question on the practice of shraadha were quite contradictory.

Shraadha is a ceremony of propitiation of ancestors by performing certain rituals with a Brahmin priest officiating. Normally, the Brahmin is compensated with a gift of clothes and/or money for this

task. A feast for the community usually accompanies a shraadha. Conceptually, the performance of shraadha, ancestor propitiation ceremonies, is closely linked with the theories of karma, dharma and the transmigration of the soul. Eighty out of 102 people told me that they performed shraadha ceremonies regularly and only 20 people said they did not. Two people gave irrelevant responses. It will be clear from these figures that the ancient Hindu ceremony of shraadha is still practised by most people though they seemed to reject the accompanying philosophical baggage of karma, dharma and the transmigration of the soul. On reflection, I think that what is significant is actual practice, which is still Hindu. Whether the answer relating to belief is to be explained in terms of lack of knowledge about these metaphysical concepts or otherwise is an open question.

Certain Hindu festivals and functions are not supposed to be performed by neo-Buddhists; all those which mark the destruction of a demon or evil are forbidden. A local Dalit Panther[5] leader told me that the killing of the demon is a symbolic representation of the desire to destroy the Untouchables. Sankranti (a festival day for Hindus) is forbidden because on that day the two sisters, Sankranti and Kinkranti, are felicitated for having killed the demon Tilasur. Diwali (the festival of lights) is out of bounds because the neo-Buddhists feel that Krishna in his Vaman avatar (the dwarf incarnation of Lord Vishnu) tricked the good Buddhist king Bali and killed him on that day. Holi (or Shimga in Marathi) is not celebrated because it is a festival where good triumphs over evil, evil in the form of dasu, dasa or rakshas (all words used for describing demons) who are the hated Untouchables. But Naag-Panchami (snake worship) may be celebrated because the Nagas are supposed to be the ancestors of the Untouchables. Some festivals like the Gauri Puja (worship of the Mother Goddess) and Ganapathi Puja (worship of the Remover of Obstacles) are expressly forbidden to the neo-Buddhists. Ambedkar himself makes a vitriolic attack on Ganapathi for having been created from the dirt on Parvati's body. In a speech, he said: 'We must give up (observing) all the religious festivals and days which we had been observing according to the Hindu religion. We must consider whether the rites performed according to the Hindu

religion are proper from the point of view of religion and morality . . .' (Source material on Dr Ambedkar, I, 1981: 161-162). But in spite of Ambedkar's strong views on the practice of Hindu rites and rituals, the Mahars of Ambegaon continue to observe them with even greater fanfare than before. I shall develop this observation later in the paper.

The other interesting feature of Mahar life in Ambegaon was that in almost every home there were pictures of the Buddha and Ambedkar, and of the various gods of the Hindu pantheon. Even if the Buddha's picture was not around, Ambedkar's photograph always found a prominent place in the religious niche. The Buddha and Ambedkar were in a sense synonymous. When people spoke of their leader — spiritual and political — they spoke of Ambedkar. Ambedkar Jayanti (birth celebrations) went on for a week. The street was decorated and a procession taken out. A community meal was organized in the Mahar chawdi (meeting place in the village), to which the Mangs (another Scheduled Caste community) also came. The younger people organized a band. As night approached, people gathered around the old kotwal (a village-level functionary), who danced with his stick. As the tempo increased, sounds of clapping resounded in the air. There was a general feeling of ebullience and well-being. There were one or two Mahars from the city who told me that this function was nothing when compared to what is organized in urban areas. They seemed to be condescending towards the rural Mahars and their rustic efforts. Buddha Jayanti, on the other hand, was a private affair, celebrated by some and not by others, and confined to people's homes. People lit agarbatti (incense sticks) in front of pictures of the Buddha and Ambedkar. But beyond this there were no public festivities. The difference in the manner of celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti is one index of the relative importance attached to Ambedkar and the Buddha.

Birth, marriage and death are three important occasions that I studied. With respect to birth, ceremonies are not frequently performed except when there is a son born after many daughters or when there is a birth after a long childless marriage. Out of the 10 births between 1980 and 1983, there were ceremonies only on two

occasions. On both occasions, the ceremonies performed were according to Hindu rites and, importantly, the pictures of Ambedkar and the Buddha were removed at the time of birth. The explanation given to me was that Ambedkar, a man of learning to whom respect was due, should not be present at the time of the pollution which accompanies birth. Out of 102 Mahars interviewed about birth ceremonies, the answers were as follows: 25 persons said they performed Buddhist ceremonies; 67 said they performed Hindu ceremonies, six people said that there was no Buddhist equivalent to a Hindu rite and four were not sure.

One might divide the ceremonies concerning marriage into the period before the marriage and the ceremony itself. All the pre-marriage activities such as the matching of horoscopes, checking up of the gotras (exogenous patrilineal descent groups), the devak (a symbol worshipped at marriage), etc. are essentially Hindu. But the ceremony itself is Buddhist: the simple garlanding of bride and groom before pictures of Ambedkar and the Buddha. Though this is not a legally recognized form of marriage, it is widely practised and the Mahars have been making efforts for it to be recognized as legal.

In the case of death, all the instances that occurred between 1980 and 1983 were dealt with in the traditional Mahar way. The bodies were buried facing east and encased in salt; people chewed neem (*Azaradichta indica*) leaves to erase the bitterness which is supposed to be the after-taste of death.

When I spoke to the Mahars about the selective adaptation of past practices, the impression I gained was as follows: there were no prescribed ways of celebrating birth or mourning death in Buddhism, or if there were, my respondents were not aware of them. A ceremonial had been developed for marriage.[6] Also this method of marriage was much cheaper than the traditional method. Besides, while pollution was attached to birth and death, this was not true of the auspicious event of marriage. Finally, and this is my analysis of it — while marriage tends to be a public event where several others are present, that is not the case with birth and death. In view of its public nature, it becomes another opportunity to assert one's identity. And the private negotiations and horoscope-matching and so on that

precede marriage are all faithfully done in accordance with prescribed Hindu procedure. Birth and death, two events over which the shroud of pollution casts its shadow, are essentially events celebrated/ mourned in private, or at best, amongst members of one's community. In the absence of a Buddhist substitute and the lack of a need to display one's identity, these continue to be observed in traditional ways. Because of the influence of Hindu notions of purity and pollution, Ambedkar is also not allowed to be present in view of his status and the polluting aspect of the events.

My fieldwork has shown that for the rural Mahar, Buddhism has hardly made any inroads into his spiritual life.[7] The celebration of permitted Hindu festivals is conducted with great gusto and ceremonies such as Gauri Puja — hitherto forbidden to the Untouchables — are now performed without hesitation. At an earlier time, whole localities of Mahars have been burnt and razed to the ground for their having performed such ceremonies in violation of social prohibitions. As Kisan Daulat said, 'When I was a child, my parents used to take me to a caste Hindu home and we took darshan (a view of the deity) from outside the house. Today, I can celebrate Gauri Puja in my home and no one can stop me.' This is indeed a paradoxical result particularly for the outside observer: the impact of Ambedkar, who wanted Hinduism to be rejected and Buddhism to be accepted, is now to be found not only in the more assertive celebration of certain traditional Hindu festivals but also in the increased reach of Mahars who are now performing Hindu ceremonies which were so far held taboo.

This paradox is less surprising when it is recalled that the neo-Buddhist movement, even if nominally a conversion movement, has had its greatest impact in building a new identity.[8] This new identity questions the traditional social order and has certainly raised the self-image of the Mahar. That new confidence is reflected in the pushing back of the boundaries of what was prohibited to the Untouchable but permissible for the caste Hindu. The belief in equality which has been generated takes expression in increasing the intensity with which festivals are celebrated. And the caste Hindu reaction to these changes corroborates such an explanation. They

resent the fact that the secular value of equality is being used to violate the sacred law of the Shastras. Access to the sacred world of caste Hindus has been provided to the Untouchables by the force of Ambedkar's teachings. Whether it is the performance of a rite or ritual or the cooking of certain religious foods, these changes suggest that the boundaries of permissible action are being changed and its territory expanded.

It is in this context that the view held by the urban Mahar intellectual or politician must be understood. That view is simply another expression of urban condescension towards the rustic and poor simpleton. If, because of Ambedkar, Hindu gods and goddesses have been evicted from their positions of respect in urban Mahar homes, that is because it is the urban way of expressing the change in identity. In the rural context, the same change in identity is expressed in a different form because the social reality of the village is different from that of the town and city.[9]

In connection with the urban context, I would like to relate an incident that I witnessed when I went to interview a prominent Mahar leader and old associate of Dr Ambedkar's. This gentleman spent two hours explaining to me the importance of the conversion to Buddhism for the continuance of the movement. He was very clear that without conversion to Buddhism, the Mahars would be betraying the cause. He is also the head of a Buddhist organization and has initiated several people. At the end of a very long session, I got up to leave. Just as I was getting out of the house, his grandsons came running out to say that their grandmother was calling me. I went back. The lady said, 'I am sorry, I did not know you were leaving. Today is Sankranti, you cannot leave the house empty-handed.' She then gave me til-gur laddus (sesame seed and jaggery balls), which are traditional Hindu festive offerings, put haldi-kumkum (a traditional turmeric and red powder offered by women to female guests) on my forehead and gave me money to buy a blouse-piece. While this was going on, the gentleman appeared. He was taken aback and muttered something under his breath about there being similar customs in Buddhism but that he would tell me about it another time. This story only serves to substantiate the point I am

making that the Buddhist identity is important mainly for the outside world. There is an attempt to emphasize one's distinctiveness and this is achieved by different methods. The inner core may remain Hindu but this in no way reflects a betrayal of the cause.

In fact, in the course of my interviews with caste Hindus, what came out clearly was that they did not resent the Mahars' conversion to Buddhism as much as their attempts, albeit sporadic, to enter the village temples, draw water from the wells, celebrate hitherto forbidden Hindu festivals, cook special foods like puran polis (sweet bread made with lentils and jaggery and used mainly on festive occasions), use ghee (clarified butter, again traditionally forbidden to Untouchables), dress in good clothes and walk freely in the village (as a number of them did). There was great bitterness expressed by caste Hindus that the Untouchables were using the secular law of equality to transgress the sacred law and they could do nothing about it. My understanding is that the Mahars were very conscious of this and therefore deliberately practised hitherto forbidden Hindu rites and rituals as a means of asserting their right to equality, knowing full well that the caste Hindu could do nothing about it. There was a certain pride in this equality. Some social scientists imply that the attachment of the rural Mahar to Hinduism is illustrative only of poverty and ignorance: this view is not only misplaced but also incorrect. Similarly, an attempt to consider the changes taking place amongst rural Mahars as evidence merely of Sanskritization/Pali-ization or an effort to emulate the ways of the upper castes would also substantially miss the point.

My experience of rural Mahars suggests that it would be perhaps misleading to define the neo-Buddhist movement primarily as a conversion movement. It goes beyond the arena of religion and assumes enormous political dimensions. Religious conversion today, more than before, is a symbol of identity formation. As a self-respect movement for a new identity, it has certainly achieved its goal and the Mahars, under Ambedkar's guidance, are no longer prepared to accept their position in society and are willing to fight tooth and nail for what Ambedkar called *manuskichya haka* or the right to humanity. One might say that the neo-Buddhist movement has had

its greatest impact on confronting, challenging, and to some extent, changing the received belief in the mind of the Mahar that he is a lesser mortal than those of the higher castes. It would seem that, after Ambedkar, the ideology of inequality cannot any longer have the same grip on the Mahar as it had hitherto.

To sum up, one would argue that while the spiritual aspects of Buddhism and its rites and rituals have not been integrated into the daily lives of rural Mahars, the secular values Ambedkar sought to propagate through the medium of Buddhism have had a significant effect upon the lives of the villagers of Ambegaon. The impact of Ambedkar lay in giving the rural Mahars confidence to challenge the monopoly of the caste Hindus over specific areas of ritual life and throwing them open, even if gradually, to those who were so far barred entry therein.

Notes

1. His reasons for his vacillation were reported in the local papers at the time. The *Bombay Chronicle* said: 'If Dr Ambedkar were to announce his decision that he and his followers are prepared to embrace Sikhism in preference to Islam and Christianity . . . the Hindu Mahasabha will be prepared, in view of their having agreed to remain within the Hindu culture, to make an announcement that it will not object: (i) To the conversion of the Depressed Classes to Sikhism; (ii) To the inclusion of the Neo-Sikhs in the list of the Scheduled Castes. . .' (*Bombay Chronicle*, 8 August 1936, p. 15).

   At the time he was seriously toying with the possibility of converting to Sikhism. He made a revealing speech about the advantages of Sikhism. The same issue of the *Bombay Chronicle* reports him as saying:

   > What the consequences of conversion will be to the country as a whole is well worth bearing in mind. Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes. If they go over to Islam, the number of Muslims will be doubled and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go over to Christianity, the numerical strength of the Christians becomes 5 to 6 crores. It will help to strengthen the hold of the (British) on this country. On the other hand, if they embrace Sikhism they will not harm the destiny of the country but they will help the destiny of the country.

2. The second important consideration that dictated the choice of a religion other than Hinduism was whether the hard-won privileges of the Scheduled Castes would be retained. He was interested in seeing that the constitutional guarantees promised by the Poona Pact would not be lost. As early as 1936, he promised his people that they would not suffer politically as a result of conversion. Zelliot quotes Ambedkar as saying in 1936 at the Bombay Mahar Conference that no 'fear need be entertained about our political privileges (after conversion), since they will follow us wherever we shall go' (Zelliot 1969a:243). During his parleys with the Hindu Mahasabha leaders, while the latter were trying to draw him towards Sikhism, Ambedkar on his part gave an assurance that he would not convert to Christianity or Islam. However, and this was the clinching consideration, when it became apparent that the British government would not guarantee neo-Sikhs the privileges of reserved parliamentary seats and other special concessions available to Untouchables, Ambedkar decided not to embrace Sikhism (Zelliot 1977:126).
3. According to Gokhale-Turner (1983:34, 35, 43), 'The absolute faith of modern Buddhists in this was brought home to me in a dramatic fashion when in 1981 I visited Ajanta in the company of two prominent literati, who assured me repeatedly that the caves and their frescoes were the products of the Mahars when they had been the first Buddhists . . . Thus the conversion in 1956 represented for Ambedkar and his modern followers the restoration of their history and the reclamation and celebration of their original identity.'

   Turner quotes extensively from Dalit literature about the psychological release or the sense of freedom that they have after conversion, but she also admits that this literature remains beyond the grasp of the masses to whom it is addressed. It is written and read by people who are in a class situation and with an orientation different from the rural people they want to influence.
4. Shankarrao Kharat's autobiography, *Taral-Antaral* (1981:394), contradicts my experience. He mentions that his mother threw the Hindu idols into the river and stopped her Hindu fasts after conversion. But she started a fast in the name of Ambedkar on Tuesdays.
5. A militant political group constituted mainly of the Scheduled Castes of Maharashtra, particularly Mahars. The Indian expression is derived from the Black Panthers of the United States of America.
6. Kshirsagar and Pawar (1980:89) mention that birth and death ceremonies in the villages are also conducted according to Buddhist rites.
7. Juergensmeyer makes a similar point with respect to the acceptance of Ad Dharm by the Untouchables in Punjab. He says, 'As a religion, Ad Dharm existed in the villages only now and then' (1982:83) which is not to say that the rural people were not affected by the ideology that it represented. 'But in urban areas the vision seemed more palpable, for it matched an already changing modern lifestyle' (*ibid*:115). Summing up his observations, Juergensmeyer says: '. . . in reality the differences between rural and urban

contexts meant that the Ad Dharm comprised two rather distinct movements, two forms of religion. In the village it was a movement whose main thrust was to accord pride and integrity to an established leadership by honouring a spiritual past and projecting a constructive future. In the cities, by contrast, the Ad Dharm was not suspended between a re-created and a visionary future to the same degree: it meshed into a genuine present, albeit a present in transition, by providing symbols of identity and ethical standards for a new species of lower caste entrepreneur. Such persons were no longer Untouchables and they refused to tolerate a world view that would characterize them or anyone else in such a way (*ibid*:123).

8. Harold Isaacs' interview with urban Mahars brings out clearly the dilemma faced even by urban Mahars when asserting their new identity. Isaacs says (1965:44-45), 'Among the Mahars I met in Bombay there was always the double edge to the dilemma: whether, if they chose to identify themselves at all, to say "Mahar" or "Buddhist", though the effect in both cases would be the same. A person would want to assert his aggressive rejection of Hinduism and says boldly "Buddhist!" while knowing he would catch at once that quick glassy look in the other's eye and almost hear the thought clicking in his mind: "Oh, Buddhist-Mahar-Untouchable keep away!". In the rural situation when the Mahar identifies himself as a Buddhist, there is no "glassy look in the other's eye" or "the thought clicking in his mind." The response is clear, "You mean Mahar" or "You Untouchables have become too big for your boots, etc."'

9. The difference between the urban and rural perspectives is nicely described in Shankarrao Kharat's autobiography (1981:195-96). Ambedkar's message to his people is read by the young Kharat to the whole bhauki (clan) when one Mahar brought a copy of the *Janata*, a weekly, to the village from Bombay. Younger people in the maharwada agreed with Ambedkar but the older Mahars felt that this message was right for the people from Bombay, not for villagers like themselves. Genuba Taral said: 'All this is fine for Bombay. But we people have to live in the village . . . Have you thought of this?. . .' Some people take a middle position,, including Rama Mahar, Kharat's father, who says: 'Babasaheb is showing us the right path. If we want humanity, this is the only way, but let us take one step at a time. Can we afford to just leap?'

   While Mukunda, the Mahar from Bombay, says that he and his friends only followed Ambedkar's teachings, an elderly Mahar, Gena, says: 'Maka, what you say is correct: But we people are rural people. We live because of the village. (The sentence in Marathi reads: *Gavachya jeevavar amcha jeev*.) We have to work on their doorsteps and only then can we get food for our stomachs. That is our situation. Just as Panda says, we shouldn't leave our old ways.' This is very much the social reality of the Untouchable in an Indian village even today.

In Arun Sadhu's novel, *Bahishkrit* (1978:9), when Ashok Ingle is asked to identify himself, the Brahmin schoolteacher is very pleased that Ingle identified himself as a Mahar and not as a Buddhist.

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THE JUDICIAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES

A. M. Shah

I

There has been an increasing judicial concern with the question of the Other Backward Classes (hereafter, OBC) ever since special provisions were made for them in the Constitution of India. State action for the OBC has increased, and the courts have increasingly been called upon to pronounce judgements on this action. In August 1990, the Central government headed by the then Prime Minister V. P. Singh, took a high jump by announcing the decision to implement the recommendations of the second Backward Classes Commission, widely known as the Mandal Commission. Immediately, the country was in turmoil, and the Supreme Court was called upon to adjudicate on the issue. In 1991, the government headed by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao made a few basic changes in the policy of reservation, and the Court has now to adjudicate on those changes also.

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The term OBC was widely used by the British administration but had come to mean 'Other Backward *Castes*' in administrative usage. It is used in the Constitution of India to designate Backward Classes other than the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Article 15(4) refers to them as 'socially and educationally backward classes of citizens' and Article 340 as 'socially and educationally backward classes'. Article 16(4) mentions 'backward class of citizens'. And Article 46 refers to 'the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people'.

In view of the precedents under the Government of India Act, 1935, the identification of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has been relatively easy. By and large the Scheduled Castes are the former-Untouchable or Harijan castes. The identification of OBCs, however, bristles with problems. During British rule a number of non-Untouchable castes were identified as Backward Classes in different provinces and states under government orders at different times. But after Independence the state governments, mainly in southern and western India, have been constrained to identify OBCs through specially appointed commissions. At the all-India level, however, they have to be identified by a commission appointed by the President under Article 340. The Mandal Commission was the second such commission to be appointed. The reports and recommendations of all these commissions have been extremely controversial, often leading to violent conflict.

The British administrative usage of the term OBC in the sense of Other Backward Castes has not only persisted, but the law courts have also from time to time justified it. The judiciary's role vis-à-vis caste has therefore greatly increased. Obviously this raises the question of not only the judicial notion of caste but also that of how the judiciary handles the social reality of the caste system while adjudicating on the question of OBCs.

The semantic equivalence between 'class' and 'caste' goes against the meanings of these two words in the social sciences as well as in the language of educated Indians influenced by the language of the social sciences. Of course, there is no unanimity about the meaning of the term 'class' in the social sciences. In particular, there are

sharp differences between the Marxist and the non-Marxist views. Nevertheless, any social scientist would hardly stretch the word 'class' to mean 'caste'.

The judiciary has devoted much attention to the question of the semantic equivalence between 'class' and 'caste'. Its position may be summed up in the statement made in the judgement of the Supreme Court in the case of *P. Rajendran vs State of Madras* (1968): 'A caste is also a class of citizens.'[1] The word 'class' is used here in a very wide and general sense, meaning a number of persons possessing common attributes and grouped together under a general or 'class' name. In this sense women, children, fathers, mothers, doctors, advocates, etc. are also classes.

One has therefore to be careful in using the word 'class' in any discussion on the subject of Backward Classes. In particular, one has to avoid the tendency to drift imperceptibly from one meaning of the word to another.

II

Special provisions for the advancement of the Backward Classes have been made in the Constitution in its chapters on 'Fundamental Rights' and 'Directive Principles of State Policy' with a view to secure to all citizens social, economic and political justice, and equality of status and opportunity — goals stated in the Preamble to the Constitution. The courts have the special responsibility of judging whether state action under these special provisions fulfil in actual practice the general goal of social justice and equality enshrined in the Preamble, and also whether it is consistent with the other provisions of the Constitution. A tension between the special provisions for the advancement of the Backward Classes, defined as castes, and the goals stated in the Preamble is built into the Constitution. This tension was aggravated by the addition of Article 15(4) to the chapter on 'fundamental rights' by an amendment of the Constitution soon after its adoption. It is well known that it was added with a view to nullify the courts' verdicts striking down

reservations for OBCs made by some states.

While the courts generally permit the use of the word 'caste' for 'class', they lay down specific conditions for considering any caste as a 'Backward Class'. The Supreme Court in the Rajendran case (1968) stated, 'If the caste *as a whole* is socially and educationally backward, reservation can be made in favour of such a caste on the ground that it is a socially and educationally backward class of citizens' (emphasis added). In another judgement the same year, in the case of *Sagar vs State of Andhra Pradesh,* the Supreme Court stated, 'In the context in which it occurs, the expression "class" means a *homogeneous section of the people* grouped together because of certain likenesses or common traits and who are identifiable by some common attributes such as status, rank, occupation, residence in a locality, race, religion and the like' (emphasis added). In a 1971 judgement, in the case of *Periakaruppan vs State of Tamil Nadu*, the Supreme Court reiterated both the above views. In a 1972 judgement in the case of *Balaram vs State of Andhra Pradesh*, the Supreme Court went a step further when it stated that a caste may be a 'Backward Class' notwithstanding the presence in it of a 'few individuals (who are) both socially and educationally above the general average'. In other words, the homogeneity test need not be met to the fullest extent.

The courts have also discussed the question as to how far a caste (as a status category) can enter into determining a class (i.e., a caste unit) as a socially and educationally backward class. The courts are unanimous in pronouncing that caste can be one of the relevant factors, though not the sole factor. In other words, according to the courts, a caste unit can be an OBC if it has certain backward features, including that of backward caste status.

While the courts have allowed castes to be considered as OBC, they have said little on the nature of caste units, on caste status, and on the caste system in general, leave alone made use of the existing social science knowledge on the subject. Such judicial apathy towards knowledge on the subject is puzzling, to say the least.

III

The caste system is so complex that it does not permit a precise definition of the caste units that may form a part of it. A search for a precise definition of caste is not likely to be successful or useful. This point will become clear as we proceed in our analysis.

The caste system is governed by the twin principles of division and hierarchy. Briefly, the principle of division (also called separation, difference, segmentation, repulsion) refers to the divisiveness of Hindu society into a number of groups and subgroups with certain characteristics. The principle of hierarchy refers to the arrangement of these groups or divisions into a graded order of high and low. Frequently, the hierarchical relations between diverse caste groups are described as vertical relations, and the caste groups themselves as horizontal units. Thus the caste system has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. In so far as the OBCs are considered backward castes, both the principles are involved in any discussion of them.

The principles of division and hierarchy are placed in a dynamic relationship with each other. As one sociologist has said, the principle of hierarchy which governs the relationship between castes enters every caste and permeates it. However, the relative strength of the two principles varies according to time and place. As we shall see, the strength of the principle of division has increased while that of the principle of hierarchy has decreased in modern times. Also, the principle of division is stronger than the principle of hierarchy in towns and cities compared to villages.

In the policy of caste-based reservation, the principle of division needs the closest and most critical attention, because castes have to be identified and listed for the purpose of providing benefits to their members. We have to examine two widespread assumptions in this regard: (i) that we can identify a caste and its boundaries easily and count its population accurately; and (ii) that all members of a caste have an identical social, economic and educational status.

A caste is considered to be a *named* group of people. However, as soon as one starts identifying and listing castes, caste names pose

problems. These names are part of the dynamics of the caste system. They reveal as much as they hide. For every caste name is not only a mark of identification of the caste group but also a symbol of its status. Any caste claiming a higher status than that attached to its accepted name would try to claim another name indicating higher status. In the same way, castes occupying higher status would deny the new name to the caste aspiring to a higher status. Frequently, different sections within a caste also have different names. In short, one should not assume that every caste name indicates a single caste, or that every caste has a single name. Anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, census officials, and authors of gazetteers and castes-and-tribes volumes looking for certainty in caste names have experienced frustration for more than a century. A deeper understanding of the caste system is required to understand the problem of caste names. It requires, in particular, recognition of the fact that there has always been mobility — both upward and downward — in the caste system.

Although the ancient four varna scheme is part of the dynamics of the caste system, the word 'caste' should not be used interchangeably with varna. Sociologists now use the word 'caste' for the word jati or jnati, although there is ambiguity about these words also. Any attempt to fit the innumerable jatis into the four-varna scheme is bound to fail. There is no historical evidence for the popular idea that the present jatis are a result of the continuous fission of the varnas. It is also noteworthy that frequently a varna name is used as a jati name; the two usages should however be clearly distinguished.

A correct understanding of the caste situation today requires recognition of the fact that 25.7 per cent of India's population is urban (Census of India 1991:1). Therefore, it would be incorrect to define caste only in terms of the village community, as is done frequently. The popular image of caste today was derived from the situation when the urban population constituted only about 10 per cent of the total population. But today the situation has changed to such an extent that it would be a grave mistake if any view of caste that is based on a rural setting is applied to the entire society.

At the present time there are three types of caste units. First, there are castes which are entirely urban. Second, there are castes the population of each of which is found living in both rural and urban areas — of course, in varying proportions. Third, there are castes which are entirely rural, but it is doubtful if many castes of this type are left now.

In the village, boundaries between the various caste groups are sharp and easily identifiable due to the prohibitions on exchange of food and water, exchange of hookah and chilam, free movement between streets, exchange of goods and services, performance of ritual services, and so on. Above all, inter-caste marriages within the same village are just unthinkable. Many of these items of behaviour are not observable in the city, and therefore, the boundaries between castes in the city are not so sharp and easily identifiable. This does not mean that castes do not exist in towns and cities. They have existed there for centuries but the nature of inter-caste relations in the city is different from that in the village.

Taking villages and towns together, the common denominator among the various characteristics of the caste group today is the rule of endogamy, i.e., the rule of marriage within the group. It is generally presumed that this rule makes every caste clearly and rigidly demarcated and easily identifiable. The reality, however, is much more complex.

IV

What is a caste group or unit? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. The main difficulty is that there can be several levels or orders of caste groups. In every region of India the Hindu population is divided into what may be called 'caste divisions of the first order'. These are the main or major divisions. Each of them may have within it subdivisions of the second order. Sociological literature on Gujarat has reported divisions going down to the fourth order among many castes of the first order. Let us take an example. Banias are a caste of the first order. It is divided into 30 or 40 divisions of the second

order, the names of some of which are Disawal, Kapol, Khadayata, Lad, Modh, Nagar, Nima, Porwad, Shrimali, Vayada, and Zarola. Each one of these is further divided into divisions of the third order called ekdas or gols, meaning endogamous units or circles. And some of these are further divided into divisions of the fourth order, called tads or factions.[2]

This illustration shows that the word 'sub-caste' or even 'sub-sub-caste' is not always sufficient to describe the internal divisions of a caste. In the reverse, the term 'caste cluster', 'caste complex', 'caste category' or 'caste conglomeration' also does not help describe the reality adequately. The situation is complicated by the fact that people themselves use the word jati for caste divisions of all the orders, and only detailed inquiry reveals the precise unit to which a person refers.

While some castes have divisions going down to the fourth order, some others have divisions going down to the third order, some have divisions going down to the second order, and some do not have any divisions at all. How many subdivisions exist in the various divisions of the various orders is a matter for investigation.

Historically, the divisions within a caste may be a result of either fission or fusion or both. What is important for the present, however, is the fact that the inclusion of a sub-division within a division may be disputed. There are always claims and counter-claims about inclusion of some sub-divisions.

It should be clear from the above that one has to be extremely cautious about caste population figures. One has to ask: to which order or level does a particular caste belong for which a population figure is mentioned? But whatever the order, if the caste unit is small and resides in a relatively small area, its population can be fairly easily counted. In every city there are at least a few small endogamous castes, sometimes composed of just two to five hundred families each, and therefore easily identifiable. Most other endogamous units are large, with members spread over many villages and towns. Some of these large castes are huge conglomerations of small castes or sub-castes, each with a population going up to several millions, and spread over not one but sometimes even two or more

states. A few examples of such castes are Rajputs, Jats, Yadavas, Marathas, Kolis, Kammas and Lingayats. The population figures for such castes are bound to be dubious. They are dubious because of the very nature of the caste system.

In the past, each sub-caste had an internal hierarchy. In a sub-caste of peasants the internal hierarchy had powerful landlords at the top and small landholders, tenants and landless labourers at the bottom. The economic and political hierarchy went with hypergamy, i.e., the people of a lower stratum got their daughters married either in their own stratum or in a higher stratum, but the latter did not give its daughters in return. This resulted in a shortage of marriageable girls in the lower stratum, frequently forcing the men of this stratum to take brides from an acceptable lower caste. In the top stratum, parents frequently tried to get their daughters married into acceptable higher castes, usually royal families belonging to these castes. The point is that the general assumption that the boundaries of a caste are sharp and easily identifiable is false.

India may be divided roughly into hypergamous and non-hypergamous areas. Most of northern, western and eastern India is hypergamous, while most of South India, except Kerala, is non-hypergamous. The boundaries of caste are usually fuzzy in the former. Even in the latter they are not as clear as they are assumed to be, particularly in the case of dominant castes (e.g., the Coorgs) which have, however reluctantly, admitted outsiders into their fold.

Every conglomeration of castes faced the problem of inclusion and exclusion. There were always some sub-castes which wanted to be included in a conglomeration while the established higher sub-castes wanted to exclude them. This resulted in claims and counter-claims regarding use of caste names. These tensions were reflected in the chapters on caste claims in all census reports till 1931.

Within each conglomeration there are thus a number of local sub-caste hierarchies. At the bottom of each such hierarchy there are poor and illiterate villagers, and at the top there are rich, educated and powerful town or city dwellers. If we bring together two poor, illiterate villagers from two different local sub-castes within a conglomeration, say Yadavas from Bihar and Haryana, or Kolis

from western Saurashtra and south Gujarat, they would not be able to even converse with one another in the same language. Only the powerful leaders and modern professionals perched on the pyramids of the various local hierarchies, who meet usually in urban centres, have a certain cultural, social and political identity.

The population of each large conglomeration of castes is spread evenly between villages and between village and town situated in an area. Anyone who tries the exercise of moving from one village to another in order to observe the spread of the population of a large conglomeration of castes would find that the boundaries of such horizontal caste units are fuzzy.

The widespread prevalence of hypergamy raises a fundamental question regarding the definition of caste as an endogamous unit. Undoubtedly, there is no inter-caste marriage in any village. But no caste as an endogamous unit is confined to one village. Every caste is spread over a number of villages and towns, and we have to examine the operation of the rule of endogamy in this regional context. We then find looseness in the operation of the rule. And this looseness is confined not just to cases of deviation on the part of individuals but frequently by an entire stratum at the lower and sometimes also at the upper end of a caste.

This point about endogamy and hypergamy at once raises the question of defining caste as a hereditary group of individuals. Ideally in an endogamous group the husband and wife have the same status, and therefore their children inherit that status. When an inter-caste marriage takes place the problem of determining the status of the child arises, and there are laws to determine the child's status in such circumstances. However, what is more important than individual cases is the widespread and regular practice of inter-caste marriages without any stigma of violation of the rule of endogamy attached to it. So much so that the origin myths of many castes derive the birth of the entire caste from an inter-caste marriage. This is the phenomenon of 'mixed unions' or miscegenation (varnasankara) widely discussed in ancient Hindu texts.

It is wrong to presume that all members of a caste have the same economic status. There was considerable economic differentiation

in almost every caste even during the pre-British period. There are several reasons for this. First, as regards occupation, one should not be misled by the caste name. For example, all members of a Potter caste were not potters, and all members of a Drummer caste were not drummers. There could also be a mixture of traditional occupations in the same caste. Second, a number of occupations were caste-free. Agriculture and animal husbandry were, of course, the most open occupations. People of almost all castes from top to bottom were involved in them in one way or another. Trading and money-lending were also caste-free. I have known of a few Chamars (leather workers) in Gujarat being traders and money-lenders during the First World War. There were many other occupations in which a smaller number of castes might have been involved, but there was hardly any occupation which was a monopoly of just one caste. Even priesthood was not the monopoly of one caste as is generally assumed. Third, almost every occupation was internally differentiated so that it could be pursued at different levels. Fourth, different subdivisions within a caste could specialize in different occupations. Fifth, in the case of castes having rural and urban sections, there was considerable difference in the occupations of the members belonging to the two sections. Sixth, while it was true that certain castes were expected to perform certain specialized functions, mainly because of the considerations of purity and pollution, the idea that every caste performed only one occupation is one of the myths about the caste system.

Along with occupational differentiation, there was considerable differentiation of wealth and income in every caste. Such differentiation could exist between households of a caste even within the same village, but the degree of differentiation could be high between one village and another, between village and town, and between one area and another, particularly in the case of numerically large, widespread castes.

There could be uneven distribution of power within a caste. Even among the smallest castes the leaders of the caste panchayat were richer and more influential and powerful than the ordinary members. In the larger and widely-spread castes, such inequality was quite

sharp. Among a few castes like Rajputs and Marathas, the top stratum included royal if not imperial families and the bottom included small landholders and even landless labourers. In a considerable number of other castes all over India the top stratum included large and substantial landowners while the bottom consisted of landless labourers. It is important to realize in this connection the implications of the fact that the political hierarchy in the country admitted of many levels from the village upward to the imperial authority. We should keep in mind the fact that every Hindu raja, however big or small, belonged to some caste, and the other members of his caste wielded varying degrees of power, while some had no power at all. Hierarchies of power existed also within priestly, trading, artisan and service castes. There was some differentiation of power even within the scavenger castes.

The main point is that when new opportunities for mobility became available at the beginning of British rule, there existed social, economic and political inequality within every caste. No caste started the race for mobility as one undifferentiated block. During British rule such differentiation increased further, and the process was greatly accelerated after Independence.

The twin facts of inequality between castes and within each caste have important implications for the implementation of the policy of reservation for the Backward Classes (to be sure, castes). Even when the British first started the policy of reservation, there was unequal distribution of wealth, income, literacy, power, etc., between castes and within each caste. Therefore, the benefits of reservation were appropriated mostly by the upper castes among the backward castes, and by the higher sections in each caste. Reservation thus strengthened the position of the stronger castes and the stronger sections within each caste.

As already mentioned, this process of internal differentiation in each caste has accelerated after Independence due to various forces such as agricultural development, land reforms, commercialization, industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization and political mobilization. Although no caste was an undifferentiated monolith when the policy of reservation for the Backward Classes was first

introduced during the British period, the degree of differentiation was not high. But now, in the 1990s, when reservation is being introduced in large parts of the country for the first time, or is being substantially increased in some other parts, internal differentiation within castes is quite high. The situation is qualitatively different from that in the beginning of this century. The method of sample survey followed by the Mandal Commission — namely, that of selecting two villages and one urban development block in every district — was absolutely inadequate to measure the degree of differentiation within a caste in 1979-80. On the one hand it excluded the large chunk of people living in the larger towns and cities, and on the other, two villages out of about a thousand in a district were just not adequate to gauge the differentiation. And during the last ten years, since the publication of the Mandal Report, the differentiation has become further complicated. Thus, the Central government's decision to apply in 1990 the Mandal Commission's recommendations to the castes listed in its report was at great variance with the social, economic and political reality concerning very many castes.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that once a caste is recognized as a Backward Caste and gets the benefits of reservation, it rarely, if ever, agrees to be de-recognized even after it has become stronger economically, socially and politically. In fact, it uses the newly-acquired power to resist all attempts to de-recognize it. This is precisely the reason why in those parts of the country where reservation has existed since the 1930s or so, there has been hardly any change in the list of Backward Classes even though considerable changes have taken place in the social, economic and educational status of very many castes. The Supreme Court and the High Courts have warned time and again that reservation should not become a vested interest and that it should be phased out. But politicians do not listen to the courts. The process of phasing out caste-based reservations should have begun at least a decade ago, but if it is not begun even now, it will become an even heavier millstone around the nation's neck.

During the last hundred years or so, there have been social

movements, sometimes with and sometimes without political motivation, to unify caste sub-divisions of the fourth order into that of a division of the third order, those of the third order into that of the second order, and those of the second order into that of the first. Such movements have met with success in varying degrees. But one thing is certain — success has rarely, if ever, meant the obliteration of sub-divisions.

Caste associations have played a vital role in the unification movements of castes, which has enabled them to play an important role in modern politics. They send petitions to the Backward Classes Commissions and even lobby and pressurize such Commissions for including them in the list of Backward Classes. Since such petitions become part of the evidence gathered by the Commissions, they need close scrutiny.

One of the widespread misconceptions about caste associations is that they are considered to be representative institutions of caste populations. This is far from the truth. First of all, there are associations at every level of caste divisions, i.e., the first order, second order, etc. Second, any of these orders of castes may have more than one association, and the different associations may work at cross purposes. It is well known that different associations put forward different claims before Backward Classes Commissions. Third, no association can be considered as representative of the particular caste whose name it carries. Usually only a small proportion of its population is enrolled as its members, and most of them, particularly their leaders, are rich and powerful members of the caste. Under no circumstances can these members be considered to be 'democratic' representatives of the entire caste.

V

The word 'socially' in the constitutional phrase 'socially and educationally backward classes' poses several difficulties. On the one hand it is used as an overarching concept to include every aspect of society, i.e., economic, political, legal and educational, and on

the other, it is used in a restricted sense to refer to a residuum, i.e., whatever is not economic, political, legal, educational, etc.

This ambiguity affects discussions on the social status of castes. Sociologists have tried to disaggregate the various elements in the social status of castes by distinguishing between what they call 'ritual status' and 'secular status'. The ritual status of a caste is determined mainly by two considerations. First, there are ideas of purity and pollution which pervade Hindu life — in the temple, in the home, in rituals and ceremonies, and in many aspects of ordinary behaviour. These ideas affect interaction between castes — in touch, in the exchange of food, drink, and other goods and services, and in many other ways. Second, the ritual status of a caste is affected by the prevalence of certain customs, habits and ways of life, as for example, vegetarianism and teetotalism, freedom of divorce, remarriage of widows and divorced women, exchange marriage, dowry and bride price. These types of considerations are summed up under the concept of Sanskritization first developed by Professor M. N. Srinivas and discussed at length by many other scholars. The secular status of a caste is viewed in terms of economic and political factors, including modern education.

Sociologists have made many systematic attempts to discover agreed hierarchical orders of castes in villages in different parts of India. They have, however, found that it is impossible to arrive at a precise hierarchical order even in a single village. By and large, while the position of the Brahmins at the top and that of the 'Untouchable' scavengers at the bottom is fixed, there is ambiguity about the relative positions of castes in the middle. There is a lack of consonance between the different elements going into the making of the ritual status of almost every caste. There are claims and counter-claims and even serious disputes about the status of many castes in a village. One can therefore arrive at only an approximate hierachical order of castes.

If this is the situation in a village, one can imagine the difficulties of determining the relative status of an entire caste spread over many villages and towns. There can be differences in the status of different subdivisions of a caste vis-à-vis other castes. For example, in one

group of villages all Brahmins might refuse to work as priests for a particular non-Brahmin caste while in another, Brahmins of low status might work as priests for the same caste, and in a third group of villages, even high status Brahmins might work as priests for that caste. Such difference in status can be quite wide in the case of a caste which is widely dispersed over a whole state or more than one state. This is related to the fact that every caste has an internal hierarchy, and different areas have different caste compositions. The main point is that any exercise to determine a clear, sharply defined social (i.e., ritual) status of an entire caste (excepting a local, small caste) is bound to be futile.

If even after studying castes in a village or in a group of a few villages for a whole year or more and using their tested techniques and methods sociologists and social anthropologists fail to arrive at the precise status of different castes, it is mysterious how the various Backward Classes Commissions can claim to have arrived at the precise social status of castes for a whole state and even for the whole of India. They seem to me to do this on the basis of arbitrary methods and preconceived notions. The so-called scientific methods they adopt to collect data seem to be rationalizations for justifying decisions that have already been taken. It is extremely surprising that learned judges accept the recommendations of such Commissions on the social status of innumerable castes.

Since a number of castes are sought to be placed in the OBC category, we should ask the question, 'What is the *common* criterion of backwardness?' In the case of Scheduled Castes there is the common criterion of untouchability. Is there, or can there be, an unambiguous criterion for determining the social status of OBCs? The main point to note in this connection is the wide spectrum of castes subsumed under the term OBC. At the lower end there are castes which are very nearly 'Untouchable' and very poor while at the top there are castes which are wealthy and powerful and possess a highly Sanskritized lifestyle. Among the eleven indicators of backwardness accepted by the Mandal Commission, one indicator is 'castes/classes considered as socially backward by others'. The Commission has not clarified who these 'others' are. In the caste

hierarchy every caste considers all those below it as backward, and therefore it is unrealistic to ask all the 'others' to provide an agreed answer about the backwardness of a particular caste.

In such a situation, the higher castes among the OBCs are bound to take greater advantage of the reservation benefits than the really disadvantaged lower castes. Since the courts do not permit the distinction between the more backward and the less backward among the OBCs, differential access to the benefits of 'backwardness' is bound to continue.

If the 'backward castes' cover a large range of castes in the vertical hierarchy in an area, is it possible to consider 'backward castes' in one area comparable with those in another? The idea of reservations for OBCs presumes that all the three thousand or so OBCs in the country are on par in a competitive situation. But can they really compete as equals? The answer may be left to the reader's imagination.

VI

As stated at the outset, with 25.7 per cent of India's population now living in urban centres, it is not right to apply the view of the caste system derived from villages to urban castes. Urban society poses certain difficult questions for the policy of caste-based reservation.

Urban society, particularly in the larger towns and cities, is extremely heterogeneous. Apart from the fact that there are people belonging to many different religions, the Hindu population in every large town and city is itself divided into many linguistic and regional groups as a result of large-scale migrations in the past. This fact raises the question as to whether there is just one caste hierarchy, or many regional caste hierarchies, in a city. Second, while there is some continuity between the city population and the rural population of a region, in the case of immigrants from other regions there is real disjunction. Third, the city population in any region is drawn from all the sub-regions. While the caste hierarchy in one subregion has many characteristics different from those in another, these

differences disappear in the city to a large extent.

But there is an even more basic question: Is it relevant to talk about caste hierarchy in a city, and if yes, what sort of caste hierarchy? It is hardly necessary to point out that in the urban economy, the traditional relation between caste and occupation is largely shattered. Of course there are even now a few caste-based occupations in towns and cities, but their organization is fundamentally different from that of caste-based occupations in the village. For example, although most of the barbers in a city might belong to the traditional barber caste, they work in hair-cutting saloons and beauty parlours. Not only that, some barbers are owners of these saloons and parlours, while others are ordinary workers under them. Frequently, one barber owns a chain of several saloons and parlours and thus operates like a capitalist entrepreneur. The same is true of the occupations of washermen, carpenters, blacksmiths, musicians, and so on. In recent years, this trend has been observed even in the so-called 'menial' occupations. In large cities like Bombay, factories, shops, offices, and other establishments prefer not to employ a full-time salaried cleaner (safai-karamchari) but to hand over the work to a contractor who hires a number of cleaners to clean several buildings one after another. Among the caste-based occupations in the city the relationship between the worker and the customer, unlike that in the village, is contractual, monetized and caste-free. That is to say, the worker provides goods and services to any customer irrespective of caste. For example, the barber or the washerman would provide his services to anyone who comes to his shop.

Although a few occupations in the city may continue to be caste-based, it is important to note that all the members of the caste are not engaged in the caste-based occupations. They take advantage of the immense range of occupations available in the city, with the result that frequently there is occupational differentiation even within a single household.

The nature of social interaction between members of different castes on the street, in the marketplace, on buses and trains, in restaurants and hotels, in schools, colleges and universities, in

factories, shops and offices, in cinema theatres and other places of entertainment, is by and large free from the considerations of caste. Behaviour stemming from purity and pollution considerations occupies a minor place in their lives. There are two major exceptions: the Brahmin priest continues to observe purity and pollution behaviour during rituals, and scavenging is still done by members of the local scavenger caste. But there are significant deviations from traditional norms in the relation of these two castes with the other castes.

Indeed, several sociologists have argued that the inter-relationship between castes in cities has ceased to be hierarchical, that the principle of division rather than hierarchy operates between them, and that there is a feeling of being different rather than being higher and lower between them. Some sociologists have gone to the extent of saying that castes in cities have ceased to be castes and have become ethnic groups.

The above discussion of caste in urban centres has an important implication for determining the *social* status of castes, particularly for their identification as 'backward'. Since the nature of social interaction in urban centres is fundamentally different from that in villages, it is impossible to assign definite social status to castes in the city on the same criteria as those applicable in villages, with the exception perhaps of scavengers.

An important consequence of the large urban population today is that while certain castes are exclusively urban, almost every other caste has both rural and urban components in varying proportions. In such a situation it is a moot point whether the urban component of a caste should continue to be considered on par with the rural component. Let it be noted that the urban component of a caste also does not have uniform economic and social conditions.

The present urban population and the increasing rate of urbanization raise not only crucial methodological problems regarding identification of Backward Classes as castes but also fundamental issues regarding the desirability and wisdom of continuing with the policy of caste-based reservation.

I hope it is clear from the above that judges have to deal with the

same basic problems regarding caste that sociologists have to deal with, which are the *identification* of caste units that can be considered as *low* in status (socially and educationally backward). Judges, however, have to follow the principle of certainty in both respects, while sociologists would argue that the ground reality of the caste system does not permit them to arrive at such certainty. The Constitution seeks to resolve the problem of certainty by entrusting the government with the job of providing a list of Other Backward Classes. As Dr B. R. Ambedkar stated during the Constituent Assembly debates on the issue, 'A backward community is a community which is backward in the opinion of the Government' (1948:702). However, the governments both at the centre and in the states hand over this job to commissions. With due respect to these commissions — some of which have even included social scientists as members or have used them as consultants — I would submit that these commissions have sought to invest caste units with a rigidity they do not really possess. Incidentally, Hindu law givers have also tried to do the same since ancient times but fortunately have not succeeded.

Notes

1. Very rarely do judges consider OBCs as groups other than those based on caste, as in *Pradip Tandon vs State of U.P.* (1975) and *Jayasree vs State of Kerala* (1976).
2. For an extensive discussion on the orders of caste divisions, see Shah and Desai (1968).

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JOB RESERVATION AND EFFICIENCY

A. M. Shah

It has become difficult to discuss the question of efficiency and merit vis-à-vis reservation for Backward Classes dispassionately these days. Even well-meaning social scientists become passionate when discussing this question and accuse others of being prejudiced by their caste and class background. In effect they repeat the debate on the relative influence of heredity versus environment on intelligence, which was settled in favour of environment long ago. No social scientist worth the name would now argue that children of blacks or lower castes and classes are born with low intelligence. This does not, however, mean that prejudices do not exist at the popular level. It should be possible, however, to rise above these prejudices and have a dispassionate discussion on the efficiency question.

The Constitutional concern for efficiency is clear in Article 335, which reads: 'The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST) shall be taken into consideration, *consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration,* in the making of appointments to services and posts connected with the affairs of the Union or of a State' (emphasis added). While inefficiency can result due to many factors, Article 335 indicates that a policy of reservation of government posts inconsistent with requirements of efficiency would become a deliberate pursuit of inefficiency.

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Why the Constitution refers to efficiency with regard to only SCs and STs, and is silent with regard to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), is puzzling. In any case, if considerations of efficiency apply to reservations for SCs and STs, they should apply with greater force to reservations for OBCs, who enjoy higher social and economic status, and whose Constitutional entitlement to reservation is lower than that of SCs and STs.

It is essential to view the term 'administration' in Article 335 broadly, and in the context of modern economy and society. A major change has taken place in the nature of personnel employed by the government during the last forty years or so. Today, administration is not confined to the Central and State secretariats and the offices of Commissioner, Collector, Magistrate and Tehsildar. The government establishments now cover a vast range of specialized fields such as space, atomic energy, aeronautics, meteorology, electronics, scientific and industrial research, and hospitals. Public sector undertakings include huge modern factories, banks and business corporations. Municipal and Zilla Parishad administrations also include technical posts such as those of architects, engineers and doctors. The so-called general administration includes many posts requiring specialized skills in economics, statistics, accounting, law, etc. With computerization the nature of skills required of the so-called subordinate staff in offices is also fast changing. When the plan to computerize land records is implemented, even village accountants will have to learn new skills.

Despite these radical changes, most advocates of reservation continue to argue in terms of general administrative posts only. They then talk of qualities of heart required of these administrators. They forget that even when we appoint a typist we look at his typing skills, not qualities of his heart.

How the government has handled the question of efficiency vis-à-vis reservation needs examination. First of all, it has exempted the defence services from reservation. The Constitution itself seems to have envisaged this exemption. In Part III on Fundamental Rights — the same Part which makes special provisions for Backward Classes — Article 33 states, 'Parliament may by law determine to

what extent any of the rights conferred by this Part shall, in their application to the members of the Armed Forces or the Forces charged with the maintenance of public order, be restricted or abrogated so as to ensure the proper discharge of their duties and the maintenance of discipline among them.' This Article seems to be a check on any possible attempt to introduce reservation for Backward Classes in the armed forces. In addition, there is the general belief that the defence of the country is so vital that the efficiency of the armed forces cannot be compromised to protect reservation for the Backward Classes.

As regards civil posts, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Commissioner for SCs and STs, the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Welfare of SCs and STs, the recently constituted Commission on SCs and STs, and above all, the MPs and MLAs belonging to SCs and STs, endeavour to enlarge the scope of reservation for these classes. On the other hand, the ministries and departments controlling their respective posts as well as the Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms try to meet the efficiency requirements of their posts. Accordingly, posts can be exempted from reservation by special or general instructions issued by the Department of Personnel. Not only specific posts but also entire categories of posts, and even entire departments and institutions, have been exempted.

It is almost impossible to obtain information about inter-ministerial and inter-departmental exercises concerning the desirability or otherwise of introducing reservation for posts in a certain department or institution or granting exemption from reservation. However, the power wielded by the concerned department or institution and by its lobby seems to be a major factor in deciding whether to reserve or exempt. Moreover, a department or institution might stand exempted simply because the pro-reservation lobbyists have not taken the initiative to bring it under reservation.

I have not succeeded in my efforts to locate a comprehensive compilation of information on exempted posts. Probably such a compilation does not exist, as it was recently reported in the press that the government was refusing to provide information on exempted posts. One has therefore to depend on random bits and pieces of

information. This information is, moreover, limited to reservation of posts for SCs and STs, and that too mainly in the Central Government services. Although the states also exempt posts from reservation for OBCs due to considerations of efficiency, I have very little information on the subject. Despite these limitations, it would be useful to analyse the available information.

A *Handbook of Reservation for SC and ST,* recently compiled by two judges, B. D. Purohit and S. D. Purohit (New Delhi: Jainsons, 1990), shows that all scientific and technical posts in the Department of Space, Atomic Energy, and Electronics have been exempted from reservation. In other departments, scientific and technical posts belonging to grades above the lower grade in Class I services and satisfying certain conditions have been exempted. In Indian Airlines and Air India no relaxation or concession in qualifications and experience is given while appointing pilots and high technical personnel. All scientific posts in the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore and the Centre for Chemical and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad have been exempted. In certain institutions of higher education, such as the IITs, IIMs and Central Universities, while reservation is made in non-academic posts, the teaching posts have been exempted, though pressures are now building up to introduce such reservation in the Central Universities.

The courts have by and large taken the position that in the case of SC and ST candidates, qualifications can be relaxed for posts at the lower levels of the bureaucracy. The judicial attitude is summed up in Justice Krishna Iyer's comment supporting promotion of Junior Division Clerks belonging to SCs as Senior Division Clerks in the *Thomas vs. State of Kerala* case: 'After all, here is a pen-pushing clerk, not a magistrate, accounts officer, forest officer, sub-registrar, space scientist, or top administrator or one on whose initiative the wheels of a department speed up or slow down.'

One of the consequences of the reservation of posts in an institution are the disputes about allocation of the reserved number of posts between its departments or sections. For example, when a certain per cent of posts have to be reserved in a university, each department claims that it is more scientific or technical than others, and therefore

should be exempted from reservation. The disputes are then settled on non-academic grounds.

Exemptions from reservation raise several important questions. First of all, where and how do we draw the dividing line? On what basis do we say that an institute for physical sciences or technology should be exempted from reservation but not a university which also has departments of science and technology. It is indeed curious that reservation exists in the teaching posts in institutions of medical education and research, including the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. Does this mean that the medical sciences are less important than other physical sciences? Similarly, while the IIMs are exempted, why are the university departments of management studies not exempted? Furthermore, what is the rational argument for exempting posts in science and technology but not in economics, history, law and other social sciences and humanities? Do we accept the view that economists, accountants and auditors are less important than physicists, chemists, zoologists, and botanists for the nation? In this post-industrial, post-modern information age, it would be ridiculous to argue that the so-called soft fields like language and culture are less important to the nation than the so-called hard fields like the armed forces and the physical sciences and technology. We should also not forget inter-sectoral linkages due to which inefficiency in one sector adversely affects efficiency in the others.

The argument in favour of exempting only higher posts from reservation needs to be examined carefully. The efficient performance of numerous tasks nowadays requires teamwork between all the members of a team, high and low. For example, in an operation theatre a senior surgeon requires not only a few junior surgeons but also nurses and other assistants. The efficiency of each one of them is crucial to the success of the operation. The same is true of army battalions, scientific laboratories, factories, offices and so on. It is well known that one of the frustrations of highly qualified scientists, doctors and other professionals in India is the poor quality of supporting staff. Second, it should be realized that many of the so-called lower jobs are becoming more and more skilled now. The day

is not far when most of Justice Krishna Iyer's 'pen-pushing clerks' will be replaced by computer operators. And third, the acceptance of inefficiency at the lower levels of the bureaucracy means open support to poor service to the public in all public service institutions, such as post offices, banks, the railways, and the Tehsildar's office.

The advocates of reservation, including judges, frequently argue that since minimum qualifications are always attached to posts, no harm would result from reservation of a certain proportion of posts. This means a selection committee need not even aim at selecting the best of the candidates. This is like saying since minimum marks are laid down for passing an examination, we need not award a first class, prizes or medals. The fundamental issue is: should we value mediocrity by design? Or, should we value excellence in every walk of life, and at every level?

The *Handbook of Reservation for SC and ST* states that the Central government has exempted from reservation a number of non-scientific and non-technical posts because of 'the exceptional circumstances and the special nature' of these posts. Most of them are posts of Private Secretaries, Personal Assistants, etc. to the Prime Minister and other ministers, to the Planning Commission members, and to the Principal Secretary and the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister. Those VIPs whose personal staff are not so formally exempted from reservation manage to get the most efficient personal staff by transfer or by deputation. Such formal or informal exemption of personal staff of VIPs from reservation indicates how VIPs observe double standards. They are no different from the advocates of local language as the medium of education who send their own children to English medium schools and foreign universities; or the advocates of swadeshi who go abroad for even minor surgical operations, and that too, at government expense. Recently a Central minister said openly that he would advocate reservations in appointments of doctors in hospitals but would get his own surgical operation performed by the most efficient surgeon. It is also not uncommon to find academics advocating reservation in the public but refusing to make appointments on reserved quota in their own institution or department.

Reservations of teaching posts in educational institutions violates a fundamental norm of education. (Reservation in admission of students is a different issue.) Every educational institution, including the primary school, needs an environment cultivating merit, if not excellence. Therefore, to compromise with merit in the appointment of a teacher at any level is to subject his students, including those of the Backward Classes, to mediocrity for the entire length of the teacher's service, i.e., a whole generation of students. If a teacher knows fully well that he has been appointed without merit, how do we expect him to enforce the criterion of merit in evaluating his students? And how can there be education without evaluation of merit? In fact, a teacher has to go on evaluating students periodically, not just at the annual examinations. To provide for reservation in the appointments of teachers, therefore, amounts to planning for inefficiency in a sector of society whose essential function is to develop efficient human resources for society. It is indeed ironical to find academics supporting reservation in the appointment of teachers.

Efficiency or merit is not a fetish of the élite, as frequently alleged. It is in fact an essential ingredient in every field of life ranging from defence services at one end to information services at the other. The future course of the nation's development will require increasing numbers of men and women with talent and skill in every department and at every level of government, and indeed, in every walk of life. Not only industry, commerce, the professions, and other fields located in towns and cities, but also agriculture and other aspects of village economy and society will require efficient administrative services. To believe that the villager does not care for efficiency is to grossly underrate his needs, perceptions and judgements.

Striving for perfection is a value in itself with deep roots in India's past, but it acquires special importance in the modern competitive world. If India is to survive as a nation in this world, it has to strive for the highest standards of efficiency in every field and remove all barriers to efficiency. Reservations for the Backward Classes in jobs in government establishments and public sector undertakings is a major barrier. During the last forty years or so, numerous distortions

and aberrations have developed in the policy of reservation. Simultaneously, considerations of efficiency and merit in the interest of the nation as a whole have become overwhelming. The nation has reached a stage when it should seriously review the entire policy of job reservations for Backward Classes, just as it has reviewed the policy of nationalization of industries and already taken steps towards privatization. The policy of job reservation needs to be replaced by effective programmes of affirmative action to promote efficiency, merit and skills among the weaker sections of society. Primary education and other programmes linked with it should receive the highest priority. Maximum attention should be given to the lowest level so that affirmative action at the higher levels can also become effective. This does not mean that we abandon the goal of social justice but use different methods to achieve the same goal.

MANDAL COMMISSION REPORT: A SOCIOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

P. Radhakrishnan

The Report of the second all-India Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission) is known not so much for its contents as for the violence it triggered off, and the 'Mandalisation' of Indian society and polity which the acceptance of part of its recommendations has set in motion since 1990. Though the violence has abated, Mandalisation itself has only begun. As both these are likely to have far-reaching consequences for India's emerging egalitarian ethos, fragile social fabric, and facade of caste and communal harmony, a critique of the Report in the context of the Constitutional provisions for reservation, and the related reservation politics will be in order.

Constitutional Provisions

The Constitutional Provisions for reservation, understood as a package of protective, preferential and developmental practices, are intended to create conditions for the social advancement of the historically disadvantaged groups, their integration into mainstream society, and participation in its opportunity structure on equal terms with the advanced groups (for more on these provisions, see Radhakrishnan 1990:191-92).

In the report of the Karnataka Third Backward Classes Commission, Justice O. Chinnappa Reddy has rightly reiterated the *raison d'être* of, and the need for, the continuation of these provisions, by calling attention to India's despairingly vast socio-economic inequalities. His reference is to the 'superior' priestly, landlord, merchant, and such other castes at one end of the spectrum, the Scheduled Caste-Scheduled Tribe (SC-ST) 'outcasts' at the other end, and the numerous other castes in between, 'who because of the low gradation of the caste to which they belong in the rural social hierarchy, because of the humble occupations which they pursue, or because of their poverty and ignorance are also condemned to backwardness, social and educational' (see Radhakrishnan 1990a:1750).

While the justification for reservation is thus self-evident, it is mainly in Article 15(4), on special provision for the advancement of any 'socially and educationally backward class of citizens', and Article 16(4), on reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any 'backward class of citizens' which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in its services, that the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) figure as a category apart from the SCs and STs.

The provision in Article 340 for the appointment of a Commission to investigate the conditions of the 'socially and educationally backward classes' should mean that it is the task of this Commission to identify the OBCs and recommend measures for their social and educational advancement. It is in pursuance of this provision that the Government of India had set up two Commissions so far.

Kaka Kalelkar Commission

The first, appointed in January 1953 with Kaka Kalelkar as Chairman and ten members, used four criteria for identifying OBCs: (a) low social position in the traditional caste hierarchy; (b) lack of general educational advancement among the majority of a caste/community; (c) inadequate or lack of representation in government service; and (d) inadequate representation in trade, commerce and industry (see

Government of India 1955, Vol.1, Chapter 5).

Despite its weak data-base and methodology (for more on this, see Radhakrishnan 1990b:23), in its Report submitted in March 1955, the Commission listed 2,399 communities as backward, with 837 of them as 'most backward' (see Government of India 1955, Vol. 2). For the advancement of these communities, it made several recommendations, in particular reservation of at least 25 per cent jobs in class 1, 33.3 per cent in class 2, and 40 per cent in classes 3 and 4; and 70 per cent seats in all technical and professional institutions (see Government of India 1955, Vol.1, Chapter 6).

However, five of its members submitted dissenting notes, one for not including Okkaligas and Lingayats living in urban areas in the list of OBCs for Mysore State, another strongly advocating acceptance of caste as the criterion for backwardness, and the remaining three strongly opposing it and the reservation of posts in government service. Of the last three, one apprehended that far from freezing, reservation would strengthen caste and social divisions, retard social cohesion, and culminate in disaster; another feared that apart from injecting the caste virus into the body politic, reservation would help only the advanced sections among the backward; the third held that while caste as a pathological condition of society could not be ignored, it should not be allowed to be used as a source for drawing benefits from the State (see Government of India 1955, Vol. 3). In a *volte face,* the Chairman himself repudiated the Commission's work in the last minute, especially its acceptance of caste as the basis of backwardness and recommendations for reservation in public service (see Government of India 1955, Vol.1: vi-x).

In a memorandum laid before Parliament (along with the report) in September 1956, the Government of India recorded its dissatisfaction with the Commission's Report:

> For the purpose of the enquiry specifically contemplated in Article 340 of the Constitution, it was necessary to consider whether these other backward sections could be properly classified, and the Commission had to find

objective tests and criteria by which such classifications were to be made; they had to find indisputable yardsticks by which social and educational backwardness could be measured. The report of the Commission has not been unanimous on this point; in fact, it reveals considerable divergence of opinion (see Government of India 1956: 1-2).

Stating that of the 2,399 communities listed 913 alone accounted for an estimated population of 11.51 crores, with the SCs and STs making up another seven crores, the government noted:

> If the entire community, barring a few exceptions, has thus to be regarded as backward, the really needy would be swamped by the multitude and hardly receive any special attention or adequate assistance; nor would such dispensation fulfil the conditions laid down in Article 340 of the Constitution (Government of India 1956:2-3).

When its efforts to devise some 'positive and workable criteria' other than caste failed, the government in May 1961 decided not to draw up all-India lists of OBCs and extend reservation in its services to any groups other than SCs and STs. Consequently, in August 1961 it informed the state governments that while they had the discretion to apply their own criteria for defining backwardness, it would be better to apply economic tests rather than go by caste (see Galanter 1984:173-76).

What happened in the states during the next three decades was enough to distort, dilute, and discredit an otherwise well-conceived policy. (For the subsequent state patterns of OBCs, see Radhakrishnan 1990:206-7, 1990c:20-22). And, it was after 'OBC' came to assume a connotation that was altogether different from the one contemplated in the Constitution, that the second Commission was appointed, that too as a political strategy by the Janata Party.

Mandal Commission

Set up in January 1979 by Prime Minister Morarji Desai, with B. P. Mandal, former Chief Minister of Bihar, as Chairman, and five members, this Commission also failed to collect basic data on the population of different castes/communities from which alone it could have proceeded to pick and choose OBCs with the help of relevant indicators. Its estimate of OBC population is a hotchpotch, arrived at by subtracting from 100 the population percentages for SCs, STs and non-Hindus (22.56 and 16.16 respectively) as per the 1971 Census, and the percentage for 'forward Hindus' (17.58) as extrapolated from the incomplete 1931 Census, and adding to this derived sum (43.7) about half of the population percentage for non-Hindus (8.4) (see Government of India 1980, Part 1:56).

The Commission's Report also does not contain any substantive data on the socio-economic, educational and occupational conditions of the different castes/communities, measured in terms of educational attainments, admissions to professional courses, employment in state and Central services, and educational, economic, and occupational background of parents. From these data alone could the Commission have made an overall assessment of castes and communities as advanced or so backward as to be brought under the Constitutional provisions.

For its 'socio-educational survey', supposedly its most comprehensive inquiry, the Commission selected only two villages and one urban block from each district (*Op. cit.*, 51). Since the Commission's main task was to identify the socially and educationally backward castes/communities (read classes) other than SCs and STs and enumerate them, its survey ought to have been sufficiently comprehensive, covering each caste/community. There are wide variations in the caste/community composition of the villages in any region, and there is hardly any village which represents all the castes/communities of a given region. So it is difficult to assume that the different castes/communities in the two villages and one urban block surveyed together represent all the castes/communities in each district.

The Commission has admitted that its 'survey has no pretensions to being a piece of academic research' and that 'it has been conducted by the administrative machinery of the Government and used as a rough and ready tool for evolving a set of simple criteria for identifying social and educational backwardness' (*Op. cit.*, 53). But such a tool cannot be used for massive welfare programmes subsumed under reservation.

Though the Commission has admitted that it used the OBC lists prepared by the states for supplementing the lacunae (*Op. cit.* 54), in the ultimate analysis its OBC lists are a compilation from the state lists. In the absence of any clear-cut criteria for identifying OBCs laid down by the Constitution or the Government of India, there have been wide inter-state variations in the composition of the OBCs and further, in several states the preparation of OBC lists was influenced by political considerations. Consequently, the use of these lists at the all-India level will only distort further the social reality of OBCs.

The Commission has claimed that all the information collected through its socio-educational survey was computer-processed and compressed into 31 tables (*Op. cit.*, 51). But these tables are not presented anywhere in the report or in its appendices. These tables were expected to be printed in Volume 5 of the report. But what passes for this volume is a single page (page 167) index of the serial numbers of 13 tables and their titles, based on the above 31 tables.

While the data-base of the Report itself is so defective, the criteria used for deciphering the data are even more so. For identifying the OBCs among Hindus, the Commission formulated 11 indicators: four supposedly on caste-based social backwardness, three on educational backwardness, and four on economic backwardness. For determining backwardness it considered caste-based social backwardness as the crucial element, educational backwardness as the linked element, and economic backwardness as the derived element. Giving a weightage of three points to each of the four social indicators, two points to each of the three educational indicators, and one point to each of the four economic indicators, and applying all the indicators to all the castes covered by its survey, it arbitrarily

classified those castes which scored 11 points or more as backward and the rest as advanced. Among non-Hindus, it treated as OBCs all 'Untouchables' converted to any non-Hindu religion, and those communities known by their hereditary occupation whose Hindu counterparts were included in the OBCs' list (*Op. cit.*, 52-56).

While the criteria for determining OBCs among non-Hindus may not pose any serious problem mainly because of their small size, those for OBCs among Hindus are so simplistic as to vitiate the social reality of backwardness. This is so for at least three reasons: First, in its comprehension of caste-based social backwardness, the Commission has also succumbed to the general confusion between historical and contemporary disabilities. As the references in the Constitution are to 'socially and educationally backward classes' which specifically include SCs and STs, ideally the OBCs should be only a residual category just above the SCs and STs, and not all those groups which are disadvantaged because of present circumstances. Among the former, backwardness is the result of the persisting evil effects of past discrimination arising out of the caste system; among the latter it is primarily due to poverty and economic backwardness.

Second, while caste is still very important vis-à-vis OBCs, first as a unit of identification and then as a tool for testing the backwardness of such units, how backward should be the really backward is a ticklish issue. It is for determining this that other criteria such as socio-economic, educational and occupational conditions have to be used. However, far from determining this lower limit, the Commission has proceeded in the opposite direction.

Third, of the Commission's criteria for social backwardness, only one (castes/classes considered as socially backward by others) is an indicator of caste backwardness, and even that is not free from ambiguity. The other three criteria are: (a) castes/classes which mainly depend on manual labour for their livelihood; (b) castes/ classes in which at least 25 per cent females and 10 per cent males above the state average get married at an age below 17 years in rural areas and at least 10 per cent females and five per cent males do so in urban areas; and (c) castes/classes in which female labour

participation is at least 25 per cent above the state average (*Op. cit.*, 52).

These are not strictly characteristics of either caste or social backwardness. For in traditional Indian society child marriage was practised mostly by the upper castes; and lower castes began practising it because of its imitation effect. Participation in manual labour and female labour participation were, no doubt, mostly lower caste practices in the traditional set-up. But these are no longer attributes of social backwardness in the traditional sense as the impoverished sections of the upper castes, including women, now participate in manual labour.

The Commission's misconception of caste-based social backwardness has distorted its enumeration of OBCs in at least two ways. One is by letting as many castes as possible into the OBC category through one or more of the various channels. If adding up castes/communities of the different regions makes sense, those listed by the Commission as OBCs among Hindus alone number 3,743 as against the total of 2,399 listed by the first Commission. If all these groups (and the several non-Hindu groups) are to be treated as OBCs, the really needy will be swamped by the multitude, and if anything, more than when the first Commission put in its recommendations. The other is by not attempting any elimination process by limiting the tests to the attributes of historical disability and ascertaining which of the castes have overcome this disability in the course of the last four decades.

Stated differently, while the indicators used by the Commission are broad enough to enumerate as backward those castes which are backward in the different senses of the term, at least in the areas of its survey, they are also so broad as to cover the layers well above the really backward. This probably explains the Commission's population estimate of the OBCs at 52 per cent, though the really backward may not be even half of this.

Though the Commission wanted to have 52 per cent reservation for OBCs in proportion with its population estimate, owing to the judicial constraint to keep overall reservations below 50 per cent, it pegged the quantum at 27 per cent, taking into account the existing

22.5 per cent for SCs and STs (*Op. cit.*, 58). However, its sweeping and rather formidable array of other recommendations more than make up for this climb down.

The Commission's general recommendations for the advancement of OBCs are twofold: First, reservation of 27 per cent jobs in Central services, public sector undertakings under the Central and State governments, nationalized banks, universities and affiliated colleges, government-aided firms in the private sector and state governments, and in promotions at all levels.

Second, 27 per cent seats in all scientific, technical, and professional institutions of education run by the Central and state governments.

The Commission's recommendation for job reservation is intended to be fortified by its recommendation that OBC candidates recruited in open competition would only be additional to those recruited on the basis of reservation of 27 per cent, unfilled quotas would be carried forward for three consecutive years before dereserving them, a roster system would be introduced for each category of posts, and finally, the age limit would be relaxed — the last two applicable to SCs and STs.

Similarly, its recommendation for educational reservation for the OBCs is intended to be fortified by recommendations for effective adult education programmes, the starting of residential schools with all facilities including free board and lodging, separate government hostels with similar facilities in the case of day scholars, and special coaching facilities in all educational institutions.

For the general economic and occupational development of the OBCs, the Commission has made a number of recommendations. These include starting cooperative societies of occupational groups and separate networks of financial and technical institutions to foster their business and industrial enterprises; the introduction of progressive land reforms and the allotment of surplus lands to OBCs. The Commission wanted separate institutions to be started for providing financial and technical assistance to artisans and craftsmen for reviving traditional occupations which may have been lost on account of industrialization and modernization.

For implementing these and other related measures, the Commission recommended the setting up of backward classes' development corporations and a separate ministry/department for the OBCs, both at the Central and state levels (*Op. cit.*, 57-60).

Reservation Politics

When the Mandal Commission submitted its Report in December 1980, the Janata Party was out of power, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was unwilling to act on it lest she should incur the displeasure of vested interests within her party. When Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister, as he admitted in an interview, he too avoided 'having a ball with Mandal', apparently as a stand against casteism, a stand for the far-fetched Constitutional perception of 'a classless and casteless society' (see *The Times of India*, Bombay, 2 September 1990).

Though the revival of the Report a decade later by the National Front with the Janata Dal, a rehash of the Janata Party, as its main constituent, was ostensibly to honour a poll promise, the manner in which it went about this task appeared both dishonourable and disingenuous. Prime Minister V. P. Singh's announcement in Parliament on 7 August 1990 of his government's resolve to implement the Mandal Report, beginning with a reservation of 27 per cent jobs in the Central services and public sector undertakings, came soon after the first assault on his ministry by its irrepressible and unpredictable Deputy Prime Minister, Devi Lal, and just on the eve of Devi Lal's much publicized 'farmers' rally' to be held in Delhi. Much to the discomfiture of even the Front constituents, leave alone the opposition parties, the notification giving effect to the announcement was abrupt, arbitrary, and cavalier.

In the interview mentioned above, Rajiv Gandhi had stated that V. P. Singh himself was opposed to the Mandal Report when it first came out during the latter's tenure as the Congress (I) Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and also when he was a member of the Rajiv Gandhi cabinet at the Centre. Obviously, his sudden decision to implement

the Report without laying the ground for it with debates, was a political ploy. V. P. Singh wanted to counter the threat of Devi Lal, who then commanded the support of the 'backward castes' in the 'cow-belt', and was a vociferous advocate of the Mandal Report. Another aim of his was to shore up the National Front's support-base among the OBCs, and to seek a realignment of political forces along caste lines.

His decision, however, had an unprecedented backlash, with virtually the whole of northern India in the grip of a mass hysteria, with educated youth in urban areas dousing themselves with kerosene and setting themselves on fire. There was a rash of such attempts reported from different towns and cities in the north. But all this had no effect on V. P. Singh and his supporters in the party.

The Supreme Court intervened on 1 October 1990 by granting a stay of V. P. Singh's notification in response to a series of writ petitions challenging its Constitutional validity. And this was followed by a series of events which are a part of India's recent political history. V. P. Singh's ministry fell barely eleven months after its induction and it was followed by the even more brief tenure of the Chandrasekhar ministry. Suffice it to say that in the 1991 mid-term polls the electorate rejected the National Front despite efforts to project V. P. Singh as the 'Mandal Messiah'. The elections brought a minority Congress (I) government into power.

The Supreme Court issued a directive to this government to make its stand clear on the Mandal recommendations, thus bringing the question of reservations once again to the forefront of the political arena. The minority Congress government, with bye-elections round the corner, with political survival as its overriding concern, changed its attitude to the Mandal Report from one of opposition to that of support.

Despite being the head of a minority ministry, or perhaps because of it, Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao was able to achieve, through his 'consensual approach', what V. P. Singh was not able to. He succeeded in bringing together politicians of different hues to the negotiation table on an issue of vital national importance. Singh boycotted the meeting which cast doubts on his sincerity as an

advocate of the interests of the backward classes. Rao's strategy also served to divide the opposition parties, in particular the partners of the National Front. But a net result of the events that had occurred since August 1990 was that both the National Front and the Congress (I) appeared committed to implementing the Mandal recommendations.

While the reservation formula announced by the Congress government on 25 September 1991 also resulted in students in the north going on the warpath, the formula would not have done any good for them or for the really backward. For, though attractive to the casteist politicians, and seemingly more equitable, the formula is fraught with danger; more so, when it is built on a report which is palpably defective, and has been the subject of a long-drawn-out controversy.

In addition to retaining the 27 per cent job reservation for OBCs as recommended by Mandal and as notified by the National Front, the formula devised by the Congress government provided for 10 per cent job reservation for the economically backward among the forward communities. This formula would have made the total reservation at the Centre 62.5 per cent (22.5 per cent for the SCs and STs, 27 per cent for the OBCs, 10 per cent for the economically backward and three per cent for the handicapped). With this and the sizeable leakage of benefits through favouritism and nepotism on the part of those in power, only a negligible fraction of the total opportunities would have been left for general dispensation. This would have led to further frustration and social unrest, not to mention utter inefficiency in the administration and services, and that in an international environ of fierce competition.

What appeared as the saving grace of the new formula, namely, provision for preference within the 27 per cent to the poorer sections of the OBCs, was negated by the provision for filling up unfilled quotas by recruiting candidates from affluent sections of the OBCs. For, given their money and muscle power, the latter could pass off as the really backward. In case of non-availability of the required number of persons from the poorer sections, the government's endeavour ought to have been to ensure that the benefits went to

them alone by gradually equipping them better instead of passing on the unfilled quota to the affluent. Concentration of the reservation benefits on a relatively smaller group, the poorer among the OBCs, rather than spreading them thinly over the estimated 52 per cent population of the OBCs, would have made the reservation policy more focussed on the really backward and therefore less vulnerable to attack from anti-reservationists. It would have also helped in preventing the vicious growth of casteism, and the competitive race for backwardness, and in gradually phasing out the reservation provisions through the adoption of appropriate measures.

Though the formula envisaged the introduction of economic criteria for ensuring that the reservation benefits reached the really backward among the OBCs, such criteria would have easily got reduced to obtaining income certificates, which like the issue of caste certificates, would have degenerated into a racket with the connivance of corrupt officials. Economic criteria can be effective only when used as a rigorous means-test package. Such a package is already available in Justice Chinnappa Reddy's report for Karnataka. Briefly, this includes exclusion from reservation of all those whose parent(s) is/was employed in higher grades (A or B, or class I or II) of the government, and related services, is a qualified professional as doctor, engineer, etc., is an income tax or sales tax assessee, or is the owner of more than eight hectares of rainfed dry land or its equivalent; and finally, all those whose parents are graduates (see Radhakrishnan 1990a:1754).

To prevent the abuse of reservation provisions Justice Reddy has recommended that any member of the OBCs shall be eligible for reservation only on production of a Tehsildar's certificate, issued on affidavits by parents and by a 'responsible resident' of the locality; and that all those who obtain false certificates, and their accomplices, including the issuing authorities, shall be punished by imprisonment up to six months, and forfeiture of all benefits secured through such certificates.

The government's decision to offer reservation of 10 per cent jobs to the economically backward among the forward communities was ill-conceived. Under the Constitution, the OBCs (and the SCs

and STs) are singled out for special treatment because of their historically accumulated disabilities. Justice Reddy has rightly noted that if the socially and educationally backward classes are to be equated with the economically backward, the Constitution would have used the expression 'economically backward' and not 'socially and educationally backward; and Article 15(4) is obviously not part of a poverty eradication programme though poverty eradication may also necessarily be involved in any socio-educational programme aimed at the removal of backwardness (see Radhakrishnan 1990a: 1751).

As the forward communities have not suffered from historical disabilities, their disabilities are not so grave as not to be overcome by their own efforts or by general state action. For this reason alone they do not deserve to be treated on par with the really backward. That apart, rather than treating the reservation provisions as merely temporary and gradually phasing them out by eliminating from time to time the affluent among the groups identified as really backward, extending them to the forward communities will not only dilute and distort these provisions but also prolong them indefinitely because of the vested interests of politicians and beneficiary communities in such provisions.

In an important judgement restricting reservation to 50 per cent in the *Akhil Bharatiya Soshit Karmachari Sangh vs Union of India* case of 1980, Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer, Justice R. S. Pathak, and Justice Chinnappa Reddy observed:

> For securing an efficient administration the governing criterion in the matter of appointments to posts under the State is excellence, and the emphasis is solely on quality. The selection is made regardless of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence. However, a quota of posts may be reserved in favour of backward citizens. But the interests of administration require that at least half the total number of posts be kept open to attract the best of the nation's talent. If it was otherwise, an excess of the reserved quota would convert the State service into

a collective membership predominantly of backward classes. The maintenance of efficiency of administration is bound to be adversely affected if general candidates of high merit are correspondingly excluded from recruitment. Viewed in that light, the maximum of 50 per cent for reserved quota appears fair and reasonable, just and equitable. . . (as quoted in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 21 January 1990).

While this ruling on quality is very important, there are at least two arguments on quantity, for pegging reservation at a reasonable level. One is of equity, whose most eloquent and emphatic advocate was probably Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the chief draftsman of the Constitution. Despite being indispensable, he indicated in the Constituent Assembly that the reservation authorized was of a minority nature (see Galanter 1984: 399-400) and illustrated it thus:

> Supposing, for instance, reservations were made for a community or a collection of communities, the total of which came to something like 70 per cent of the total posts under the State and only 30 per cent are retained as the unreserved, could anybody say that the reservation of 30 per cent as open to general competition would be satisfactory from the point of view of giving effect to the first principle, namely that there shall be equality of opportunity? It cannot be, in my judgement. Therefore, the seats to be reserved, if the reservation is to be consistent with sub clause (i) of Article 10 [now 16], must be confined to a minority of seats. It is then only that the first principle could find its place in the Constitution and be effective in operation (as quoted in Sharma 1982:10).

The other argument is of feasibility. Criticizing the reservation package announced by Narasimha Rao as populist, aimed only at getting more votes, Vasant Sathe, a senior member of the Congress (I), added in an interview to the *Indian Express*:

> The Supreme Court has said that reservations should not exceed 50 per cent, and now we are saying that is not sacrosanct. The moment you say that you are opening up a Pandora's box. When you have accepted over 60 per cent reservations, with what logic can you restrict demands for further quotas?. . . Fifty per cent is a Laxman Rekha. Once Sita, that is, the government, decides to cross it, a casteist Ravan will inevitably carry her away (see *Indian Express,* Madras, 30 September 1991).

Conclusion

The Supreme Court rulings of 16 November 1992, on the National Front government's notification of 13 August 1990 and the Congress government's notification of 25 September 1991, by a nine-judge Bench constituted for the first time to finally settle the legal position on job reservation, have vindicated most of the views expressed in the above critique of the Mandal Report, and the two government notifications on it.

Among other things, the rulings hold the National Front government's notification valid and enforceable subject to the exclusion of the 'creamy layer' from the notified OBCs; Clause 1 of the Congress government's notification on preference to the poorer sections as requiring to uphold its validity; Clause 2 on 10 per cent reservation for the economically backward as invalid.

While the effects of these rulings have only begun to unfold, it is important to note the following observations by Béteille, which he made a few days after the unanimous and enthusiastic endorsement by Parliament on 11 August 1982 of the Mandal Report:

> If Parliament has acted in full awareness of the likely consequences of its action, we are perhaps entering a new phase in the reconstitution of Indian society. This reconstitution may be no less far-reaching in its scope than the one attempted by the new Constitution which

> Indians fashioned for themselves on achieving independence (Béteille 1992:60).

While Béteille did not elaborate what kind of reconstitution he envisaged, a reconstitution is certainly taking place as a result of the changes in the caste-politics-reservation nexus and their effect on Indian society from the time V. P. Singh began the Mandalisation of Indian society and polity in 1990.

It is possible to discern a number of related factors. These include the positive response to the Court rulings by the Centre and a number of states by introducing reservation for the OBCs for the first time since the reservation provisions came into force in 1950, the defiance of the Court rulings by some of the states, political considerations and brazen vote-bank politics still overriding Constitutional provisions and their judicial interpretation in most states, resurgence of the glamour for OBC status, the language of 'social justice' to and 'empowerment' of the weaker sections increasingly used by politicians, increasing caste conflicts as in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, backward caste oriented politics in these two states, with an increasing challenge to the hegemony of the upper castes and the resultant caste violence which is now on the increase, and so on. While a discussion of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper, it needs to be emphasized that irrespective of the effects of the implementation of Court rulings, the problem of reservation has at least three interrelated dimensions.

First, the problem of governance, the failure of the State to ensure equality in the sense in which Tawney perceived it, that is, to ensure that 'the whole of the rising generation, irrespective of income or social position, grows up in an environment equally conducive to health, enjoys equal opportunities of developing its powers by education, has equal access, according to ability, to all careers, and is equally secure against being crushed by the contingencies of life' (Tawney 1952:13-14). In the Indian context such an equality is still a far cry.

Second, the tension between India's Constitutional commitment to formal equality and the deviation from it for special dispensation

(reservation as a more familiar usage) incorporated into this regime of formal equality, and the resulting difficulty in containing opposition to such deviation.

Third, the conflict between State and society. Though India is now committed to formal equality, its society is still permeated by centuries-old and historically-accumulated inequalities. So long as the values (read prejudices) of the society remain what they are, this conflict will continue.

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THE MANDAL JUDGEMENT: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION AND CRITIQUE

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Introduction

The Constitution of India guarantees equality of opportunity as a fundamental right in matters of employment under the State.[1] It was, however, perceived that the enforcement of the right of equality based on merit would perpetuate existing inequalities in society instead of eradicating them. Therefore the founding-fathers envisaged special provisions for the reservation of appointments in favour of the backward classes.[2] These were extended to seats in professional courses like medicine and engineering in favour of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes, and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.[3]

The right to equality of opportunity exists in favour of individuals, whereas the provision for reservation exists in favour of groups. The former is enforced by the courts and the latter by policies laid down by legislatures and implemented by the executive. The balance envisaged by the Constitution between these rights gives rise to claims in law and tension in society. Over the years the judgements of the Supreme Court lacked consistency on some aspects. The decision on *Indra Sawhney vs Union of India* authoritatively lays down the

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law on various issues. Some of the important aspects of this landmark judgement will be considered here.

Background

Reservations in government services were in vogue in South India including Madras, parts of present Andhra Pradesh (formerly a part of Madras Presidency), Karnataka and Kerala even prior to Independence. In the Central services, while there were reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes there were no reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). A demand was voiced to introduce reservations for the OBCs even in the Central services. The Central government constituted the first Backward Classes Commission in 1953 under the Chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar, which submitted its report in 1955.[4] The Commission was of the view that for purposes of reservation, the social position which a community occupied in the caste hierarchy should be taken into account. But the Chairman had serious misgivings and dissented from this view. No action was taken on the Report, and it was not even discussed in Parliament.

The Central government wrote a letter in 1961 to the state governments on the subject stating that even if the Central government were to specify under Article 338 (3)[5] certain groups of people as belonging to 'Other Backward Classes', it would be open to every state government to draw up its own lists for the purposes of Articles 15 and 16. Further, the communication stated that 'in the view of the Government of India it would be better to apply economic tests than to go by caste.'[6] It may be noted that the state governments have since then appointed 26 commissions to go into this difficult question of identifying 'Other Backward Classes'. In 1979 the Central government appointed the Second Backward Classes Commission under the Chairmanship of B. P. Mandal to investigate the conditions of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) within the territory of India. It adopted 11 indicators to ascertain SEBCs, and identified 3,743 castes as Backward Classes,

which it concluded constituted at least 52 per cent of the population. An Office Memorandum (OM) was issued on 13 August 1990 reserving 27 per cent of the posts in the Central services in favour of SEBCs. This was modified by another OM issued on 25 September 1991 providing for the reservation of another 10 per cent of the vacancies in civil posts and services for other economically backward sections of the people not covered by any existing scheme of reservation.

There was widespread violence and self-immolation by students who feared reduction in their job prospects following the first OM in August 1990. The OM of 13 August 1990 as modified in 1991 was challenged before the Supreme Court in a series of writ petitions titled *Indra Sawhney vs Union of India,* popularly referred to as the *Mandal* case.

In view of the importance of the matter, a bench comprising nine judges heard the case. The leading opinion[7] was delivered by Justice Jeevan Reddy, on behalf of Chief Justice Kania, Justices Venkatachalaiah, A. M. Ahmadi and himself. Pandian and Sawant JJ delivered separate but concurring opinions, while Justices Thommen, Kuldip Singh and R. M. Sahai gave separate dissenting opinions. The court framed eight questions[8] for consideration and both the majority and minority opinions appended their summary of answers[9] to the questions. Barring the issue of reservation in promotions, the judgement did not lay down the law affecting the existing law applicable to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Mandal Criteria

The position relating to the Mandal criteria is not clear in the judgements.[10] Jeevan Reddy, J., at one place said, 'The relevance of the criteria evolved by Mandal Commission has not been questioned by any of the counsel before us.'[11] But Pandian, J., in his opinion, said that the counsel had taken 'potshots' at the Mandal report.[12] It seems that apart from the caste factor, aspects relating to the substance of the criteria had not been raised by the counsel, nor considered by the court.

There will be a tendency to rely on these criteria on the part of the government for the purpose of identification of OBCs in the future. Therefore, a flaw in some of the indicators needs to be pointed out. Among the indicators of Mandal, there is the social indicator of the age of marriage below 17 years, the educational indicator pertaining to children in the age group of five to 15 years who had never attended school, and the economic indicators where the source of drinking water was beyond half a kilometre for more than 50 per cent of the households. It may be pointed out that these are serious omissions on the part of the State in not implementing laws like the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, the declared policies relating to free and compulsory education (Article 45 of the Constitution), and provision for drinking water. If we take into account the impediments imposed on certain groups by reservation, the question arises: To what extent can the above factors be attributed to 'low ritual status' after four decades of Independence, with governments elected on the basis of adult franchise? In what measure can this generation of upper castes be held answerable for indicators pertaining to dropouts from schools? Consumption loans are taken not merely for economic reasons but also for social purposes like marriages, funerals and dowry. Can the upper castes be asked to bear the penalty for them? Further, these indicators discriminate against backward groups in 'forward' states. For example, in a state like Kerala they will lose out on the first three criteria above.

Theories of Reservation

The majority judgement is significant in its articulation of a theory of reservation. It may be recalled that Justice Krishna Iyer referred to reservation as a 'conceptual disaster area'.[13]

J. W. Nickel, in the context of affirmative action programmes in the US, referred to three 'principles', namely, the compensatory principle, the distributive justice principle, and the utility or welfare principle.[14] The different theories that were stated in the context of reservation in India will now be listed:

Compensation or Reparation: Reservations are envisaged as reparation for past injustices. With respect to reservations in favour of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, this theory has been invoked. Pandian, J., in his judgement relies on this theory [15] even as regards reservations in favour of OBCs, and has taken the view that there can be reservation in excess of 50 per cent posts.

The objection to this theory of reparation is that beneficiaries are not the actual victims, and the persons who bear the cost are not the actual oppressors, and that it makes the sons pay for the sins of their fathers for unspecified generations. The objection gets reinforced when we consider that Muslims and Christians are also asked to bear the disadvantages of reservation.

Proportional Equality: Justice Mathew in *Thomas* was of the opinion that reservations are based on proportional equality.[16] It may be recalled that among the concepts of equality three stand out prominently, viz., numerical, meritarian, and proportional. Under the first, the distribution of goods or advantages is among all, irrespective of merit or need, and on the basis of equality of human worth. In the second, the distribution is according to merit or efficiency as it promotes the social good. This is particularly suited where the distribution of scarce goods or positions is concerned. On the other hand, where great inequalities exist, the distribution of goods on the basis of merit, instead of diminishing inequalities, will widen them. Therefore, in order to promote overall equality in society, a third mode of distribution based on proportional equality may be adopted; that is , by taking a *relevant criterion* into account to balance the disadvantage suffered and thereby making the distribution dependent upon proportion.

Proportional equality as the basis of reservation is questioned on three counts. First, under it caste cannot be considered as a relevant criterion as it is a prohibited criterion under the Constitution. Second, in case of reservation in favour of Scheduled Castes, only Hindu and Sikh Scheduled Castes are given the benefit but not those who become converts to Islam or Christianity. Third, the poor among the forward castes, or among the non-Hindu communities, suffering the

same kind of disabilities, are not entitled to the benefit of reservation.

Distributive Justice: Jobs, licences, subsidies and contracts under the state are considered to be the largesse of the government and these have been referred to as 'New Property'.[17] According to the theory of Distributive Justice these resources must be distributed equitably among the people.

Dr Thommen in his opinion referred to this aspect thus:[18] Affirmative action is not merely compensatory justice, which it is, but it is also distributive justice seeking to ensure that community resources are more equitably and justly shared among all classes of citizens.'

Empowerment: The majority judgement in the *Mandal* case is conspicuous for its enunciation of sharing of state power as the basis of reservation in appointments under Article 16(4). It said:[19] 'In short, the objective behind Art.16(4) is empowerment of the deprived backward communities — to give them a share in the administrative apparatus and in the governance of the community.'

The theory of empowerment propounded by the majority opinion gives rise to some basic questions. First, given the diversity of the country and the vastness of its population, and the large number of caste groups identified as backward (3,743 by Mandal and about 1,400 by a later survey), whether the small number of positions in the Central services will empower the deprived sections. Second, as pointed out by André Béteille,[20] the judicial process is concerned with authority, that is to say, the legitimate exercise of power, while the empowerment of groups is within the province of political and social processes. Third, the empowerment of groups on the basis of caste ignores a most significant section of people who, in terms of social, economic and political power, constitute a most deprived section of the population, namely, women. It may be noted that in the First Backward Classes Commission Report, 'All women were regarded as "backward" though they were not listed among the Backward Classes, since they cannot be regarded as a separate community.'[21]

Meaning of the Term 'Class'

Article 16(4) of the Constitution of India provides for the 'reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which in the opinion of State is not adequately represented in the services under the State.'

The interpretation of the word 'class' in this Article gave rise to divergent opinions in the Supreme Court itself prior to the Mandal judgement.

As is well known in sociology, 'class' is an open category while 'caste' is a closed category, that is to say that while the class status of an individual may vary during his lifetime, caste status, an attribute of birth, will not change. The general, if not invariable, trend of the state governments has been to consider 'backward castes' as being synonymous with 'backward classes.'

In *Balaji,*[22] Justice Gajendragadkar stressed the fact that the Constitution used the term 'backward classes' and not 'backward castes'. He further pointed out that a caste test of backwardness would fail in the case of Muslims and Christians.

There was a drastic deviation from this view in two later cases, viz., in *Rajendran*[23] and in *Periakaruppan.*[24] In *Rajendran*, the Madras government listed as backward classes castes which in its opinion were socially and educationally backward, according to a list originally drawn up in 1906, and worked on with subsequent modifications. The argument of the state was that the castes specified in the list were as a whole backward. The Madras list of backward castes was upheld on the ground that 'caste is also a class of citizens'. The same was reiterated in the later case stating that 'a caste has always been recognized as a class.'

The majority judgement referred to the use of the terms 'class' and 'caste' in pre-Independent India; that the term 'Depressed Classes' was used with reference to 'Untouchables', and that in Bombay Province in 1925 'Backward Classes' was defined as all except Brahmins, Prabhus, Marwaris, Parsis, Banias and Christians. After noting these and others like the Madras Provincial Subordinate Service Rules, 1942, the opinion stated:[25] 'All the above material do

go to show that in pre-Independence India, the expressions "class" and "caste" were used interchangeably and that caste was understood as an enclosed class.'

Further, the opinion proceeds to say as to why the word 'class' was the natural choice in the context of Article 16(4). First, non-Hindu religions did not recognize caste even though castes did exist even among these religions to a varying degree. Second, a constitution is a document which is expected to endure for centuries.

The majority judgement stated that it 'cannot be concluded either that "class" is antithetical to "caste" or that a caste cannot be a class or that a caste as such can never be taken as a backward class of citizens. The word "class" in Article 16(4) in our opinion, is used in the sense of social class — and not in the sense it is understood in Marxist jargon.'[26] After noting the Constituent Assembly Debates, *Rajendran, Trilokinath II,*[27] *Balram,*[28] and *Periakaruppan* cases, the majority opinion reiterated: 'A caste is nothing but a social class — a socially homogeneous class. It is also an occupational grouping with this difference that its membership is hereditary. One is born to it. Its membership is involuntary.'[29]

Concept of Backward Class

The Constitution in the context of conferment of benefits or special protection to deprived sections uses three phrases viz., 'weaker sections' (Article 46),[30] 'backward classes' (Article 16[4]), and 'socially and educationally backward classes' (Article 340[1]).

The first amendment of the Constitution which inserted Clause (4) of Article 15, contains the phrase 'socially and educationally backward class of citizens' along with the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The amendment enabled the State to make special provision (e.g., admission to professional colleges) for the advancement of these groups.

A question before the court was whether the phrase backward classes would include 'weaker sections'. Distinguishing the two phrases, Sawant, J., pointed out[31] that the concept of weaker sections

is much wider and differs from backward classes on three counts. First, weaker sections may not form a class, and they may be weak as individuals only. Second, their weakness may not be the result of social and educational backwardness. Third, even if they belong to an identifiable class, and that class is represented in the services of the state adequately, though they may not be entitled to the benefit of reservation under Article 16(4), they may still be entitled to benefits of measures taken under Article 46. He also noted that weaker sections (other than Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes) may include persons affected by disasters like flood, fire, etc., physically and mentally handicapped persons, slum-dwellers, and those living below the poverty line.

Does the term 'backward classes' (Article 16[4]) mean 'socially and educationally backward classes' along with Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Article 15[4])? Prior to *Mandal*, both the expressions were considered synonymous. On this Justice Palekar[32] stated: 'It is social and educational backwardness of a class which is material for the purposes of both Articles 15(4) and 16(4) but Article 16(4) does not contain the qualifying words "socially and educationally".' The majority view noted that the term 'backward classes' denotes a much larger class than SEBCs used in Article 340, and that a beneficial provision dealing with reservation should not be given a limited meaning. Moreover, when speaking of reservation in appointments/posts in the State services — which may mean, at any level whatsoever — insisting upon educational backwardness may not be quite appropriate.'[33]

A question that arises in this context is whether backward classes can be further subdivided into 'backward' and 'more backward'. Formerly, *Balaji* held that such subdivision was invalid. The majority opinion overruled *Balaji* on this point and held such categorization could be made. The logic behind this view has been stated to be that if Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs are lumped together, then OBCs will take away all the vacancies.[34]

Test of Social Backwardness

The majority judgement is notable for its general preference for social backwardness as a measure of backwardness. Adverting to this, Justice Sawant in his concurring judgement observed that the poor are to be found in all castes and communities. But there are variations among the different sections of people in the nature and degree of economic backwardness, and its causes and effects. Among the higher castes the economic backwardness is not due to their social backwardness. On the other hand, among the lower castes their social backwardness is the cause of their educational and economic backwardness.[35]

Emphasizing the importance of social backwardness in the context of Article 16(4), the majority opinion stated:[36]

> [I]f one keeps in mind the context in which Article 16(4) was enacted it would be clear that the accent was upon social backwardness . . . The Shudras, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and other similar backward social groups among Muslims and Christians had practically no entry into the administrative apparatus . . . The idea was to enable them to share the state power. We are, accordingly, of the opinion that the backwardness contemplated by Article 16(4) is mainly social backwardness.

The other side of the coin is the rejection of the economic test. Justice Sawant in his concurring judgement pointed out that if poverty alone is made the test then the socially and educationally advanced sections will 'capture' all posts in the reserved quòta, and that the socially and educationally backward classes would be left high and dry. The majority opinion also rejected the view that the OBCs should be situated similarly to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes for qualifying as backward classes, as Article 16(4) does not expressly refer to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.[37]

Identification

With respect to identification, the leading judgement says that the ultimate idea is to survey the entire populace and in that direction one can well begin with castes. The judgement observes:[38] 'What is unconstitutional with it, more so when caste, occupation and social backwardness is so closely intertwined in our society?' It has been pointed out that the concept of caste in this regard should not be confined to Hindu castes alone and should be extended to caste groups in other religions like Muslims and Christians wherever they obtain as a social fact, irrespective of religious sanction. Having exhausted caste groups, the judgement says the authority may take up the Muslim community (excluding the caste-groups already identified) to examine whether it can be characterized as a backward class; similarly Christians may also be considered. The leading opinion broadly commended the approach made by Justice Chinnappa Reddy in Karnataka.[39]

Occupational Cum Income Test Permissible

The leading judgement as well as the concurring judgements rejected the economic criterion as the test of backwardness. Further the majority opinion says:[40]

> While answering question 3(b) we said that the identification of backward classes can be done with reference to castes along with other occupational groups, communities and classes. We did not say that this is the only permissible method. Indeed there may be some groups or classes in which caste may not be relevant at all. For example, agricultural labourers, rickshaw pullers/ drivers, may well qualify for being designated as backward classes.

Exclusion of Creamy Layers

Experience with the policy of reservation had indicated that the advanced sections of the backward classes take away the benefits of reservations which are meant for weaker sections.[41] To eliminate this possibility some state governments like Kerala introduced a means test thereby excluding persons from backward classes whose income was above a certain limit from availing themselves of the benefits of reservation. In *Jayasree*[42] the Supreme Court upheld the validity of the means test. The members of backward classes who are advanced socially, economically and educationally are referred to as 'creamy layers'.

Justice Chinnappa Reddy in *Vasanth Kumar*[43] entered a caveat against the argument to exclude creamy layers. He was of the view that it could not be considered as bad if the creamy layers siphon off the benefits, just as the unreserved seats are taken away by the creamy layers. However, in the Mandal judgement the majority opinion upheld the exclusion of creamy layers of backward classes stating that the concept of class denotes a number of persons having common traits; that if the connecting link among backward classes is social backwardness then it should be broadly the same in a given class; that if some members are far too advanced then the connecting link snaps and they can no longer be considered as belonging to the same group. Jeevan Reddy, J., in his opinion (on behalf of the majority), stated:[44]

> While we agree that clause (4) of Art.16 aims at group backwardness, we feel that exclusion of such socially advanced members will make the 'class' a truly backward class and would more appropriately serve the purpose and object of clause (4).

With the exception of Justice Pandian all the other judges took the view that creamy layers should be excluded from the category of backward class. But there is a divergence of opinion as to the basis on which such exclusion should be made. The majority opinion

pointed out that such exclusion should not be merely on economic grounds unless the economic advancement was so high that it necessarily meant social advancement. To emphasize the point the opinion gave the illustration of a carpenter belonging to a backward class and earning a high sum in the Middle East. It also noted that while an income of Rs 36,000 per annum may not be much in a city like Bombay, it would be a handsome amount anywhere in rural India, and that agricultural income was difficult to ascertain. But nonetheless Jeevan Reddy, J., stated that when a member of a backward class became an I.A.S. or an I.P.S. officer, his social status increased, and that in such a situation it was but logical that his children should not be given the benefit of reservation.

Justice Thommen in his dissent preferred the adoption of the means test[45] to remove creamy layers from the backward classes. Kuldip Singh, J., in his judgement observed:[46] 'I, therefore, hold that means test is imperative to skim off the affluent sections of the backward classes.' Sahai, J., stated that apart from income test, provision should be made that wards of those persons of backward classes who achieved a particular status in society, either political, social or economic, or whose parents were in the higher services, should be precluded from the benefits of reservation.[47]

Some of the difficulties that one encounters in implementing the means test may be noted. Real incomes are often suppressed, certificates are often issued without verification, and false certificates are frequently submitted. Pandian, J., in his opinion listed seven of them by way of illustration.[48] Galanter,[49] in the context of application of economic tests for reservation, pointed out some of the problems that arose in the operation of an income test. For example, if a family was joint, should the income of the joint family, or that of the coparcener, be taken into consideration? Difficulties with regard to assessment and verification arose where a retired person, or a person with limited means undertook part-time employment to augment his income.

The court directed the Government of India to specify the basis of exclusion — whether on the basis of income, extent of holding or otherwise — of creamy layers within a period of four months. The

OM of August 1990 would be operative only subject to such specification.[50]

Reservations in Promotions

In *General Manager of Southern Railway v. Rangachari*[51] the Supreme Court took the view that there could be reservation in promotions also. There an employee challenged the directive of the General Manager ordering the reservation of selection posts in Class-III Railway Service in favour of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Supreme Court upheld the argument stating:[52]

> The condition precedent for the exercise of the powers conferred under article 16(4) is that the State ought to be satisfied that any backward class of citizens is not adequately represented in its services. The condition precedent may refer either to the numerical inadequacy of representation in services or even to the qualitative inadequacy of representation.

Two out of the five judges dissented from the view. Neither the majority opinion nor the minority opinion adverted specifically to the social cost — the efficiency in administration which is a relevant consideration under Article 335. When a junior or inefficient person is promoted there is not only much resentment but it also demoralizes the efficient and hard-working member. This in turn gave rise to Scheduled Caste and Non-Scheduled Caste employees' unions in the same organization.

The late Justice K. Subba Rao had suggested that in order to overcome the effect of reservation on efficiency in services, there should be direct recruitment at different levels.

In the Mandal judgement, under question No.7, the majority dealt with the issue whether the Article 16(4) provided for reservation in promotions also. At the outset it should be pointed out that the Attorney General objected to this issue being considered on the

ground that the impugned OM did not provide for such reservation in promotions. Ahmadi, J., upheld the objection.

With respect to the preliminary objection, the majority judgement states that when[53] 'this larger Bench was constituted with a view to finally settle the legal position relating to "reservations" the idea was to have a final look at the said question and to settle the law in an authoritative way.'

It may be recalled that in *Rangachari* the court, referring to the impairment of efficiency arising out of such reservation in promotions noted:[54] '. . . but the risk involved in sacrificing efficiency of administration must always be borne in mind when any State sets about making a provision for reservation of appointments and posts.'

Referring to the above observation, the judgement observed:[55]

> We see no justification to multiply 'the risk', which would be the consequence of holding that reservation can be provided even in the matter of promotion. While it is certainly just to say that a handicap should be given to backward class of citizens at the stage of initial appointment, it would be a serious and unacceptable inroad into the rule equality of opportunity to say that such a handicap should be provided at every stage of their promotion throughout their career. . . . The members of the reserved categories need not have to compete with others but only among themselves. There would be no will to work, compete and excel among them.

It was also pointed out that in the debates of the Constituent Assembly, none referred to reservations in promotions. The court also clarified that its ruling would not have the effect of confining the reserved categories to the lowest cadres, because direct recruitment takes place at several levels of administration.

It was held that *Rangachari,* to the extent it laid down that Article 16(4) permitted reservation even in promotions, stood overruled. It was clarified that the ruling in *Mandal* would be operative prospectively and would not affect promotions already made. The

court further stated that such reservations in promotions will continue in operation for a period of five years from the date of judgement.

Whether Reservations are Anti-Meritarian

In *Balaji* case it was assumed that reservations are anti-meritarian. For example, in *Janki Prasad Parimoo*[56] it was noted: 'It is implicit in the idea of reservation that a less meritorious person is preferred to another who is more meritorious.' To the same effect is the opinion of Khanna, J., in *Thomas*. However Krishna Iyer, J. in *Thomas* said that efficiency in terms of good governing means not just marks in examinations but also responsible and responsive service. Chinnappa Reddi, J., in *Vasanth Kumar*[57] was also of the view that a person belonging to the weaker sections may be able to tackle bravely the problems of weaker sections.

In *State of M. P. vs Nivedita Jain*[58] admission to the medical course was by an entrance examination. For the general candidates the qualifying marks were 50 per cent, for the Scheduled Castes 40 per cent and for the Scheduled Tribes 30 per cent. Finding that S.C. and S.T. candidates did not qualify in numbers equal to the number of seats available, the government did away with the minimum altogether. The government's action was challenged but the Supreme Court upheld it.

Referring to this case the Supreme Court in the *Mandal* judgement said that as it was a case under Article 15, Article 335 had no relevance. But in the case of Article 16, Article 335 would be relevant and any order on the lines of the MP Government in *Nivedita Jain* would be invalid. To wit, in the matter of appointing a Medical Officer it is not open to the government or Public Service Commission to say that there shall be no minimum qualifying marks while prescribing a minimum for others. It is open to the government to prescribe a reasonably lower standard for the Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes/Backward Classes, consistent with efficiency of administration.

The leading judgement also stated that in certain services merit

alone counts and that it would not be advisable to provide reservations. The court stated the following as being free from reservation: (i) Defence Services including all technical posts but excluding civilian posts; (ii) All technical posts concerned with research and management including those connected with Atomic Energy, Space Research and establishments engaged in production of defence equipment; (iii) Teaching posts of Professors; (iv) Posts in super-specialities; (v) Posts of pilots in Air India and Indian Airlines. The list, it was clarified, is not exhaustive but only illustrative.

Finally, the Supreme Court gave the following directions:

(1) The Government of India, the State Governments and the Union Territories shall within 4 months from the date of judgement constitute a permanent body for entertaining, examining and recommending upon requests for inclusion and complaints of over-inclusion and under-inclusion in the list of other backward classes. The advice tendered by such body will ordinarily be binding.

(2) Within 4 months from 16.11.1992 (date of the judgement) the Government of India shall specify the bases, apply the relevant and requisite socio-economic criteria to exclude any socially advanced persons/sections ('creamy layers') from the Other Backward Classes. The implementation of the Office Memorandum dated 13 August 1990 shall be subject to such exclusion. (This direction shall not apply to states where reservations in favour of backward classes are already in operation. Such states shall, however, evolve criteria to exclude creamy layers within a period of 6 months).

(3) The Office Memorandum dated 25 September 1991 which gave an additional 10 per cent reservation in favour of other economically backward sections of people not covered by the Office Memorandum 1990, was held invalid.

An Evaluation

From the above overview of the decision, we may notice some aspects of its fallout. The majority opinion gave primacy to the caste test

and justified it as a social fact, while the minority emphasized the secular ideals of the Constitution and the need to eschew prohibited classifications like race, religion or caste. In rejecting the alternative modes of identifying OBCs like 'occupation-cum-social-cum-educational-cum-economic criteria', and in opting for caste test, the majority buttressed caste not only among Hindus but also among Muslims and Christians.

Sahai, J., noticed the tension that arose in Constitutional perceptions by the recognition of the caste test. He referred to the statement of the Mandal Commission that what caste lost on the ritual front it gained on the political front.[59] As noted by the learned judge, even though a person may be given a ticket on the basis of caste considerations, yet if he or his agent sought votes on the basis of caste or religion, he was disqualified on the ground of corrupt practice under the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

André Béteille points out that while politicians can legitimately be expected to promote group interests, a cardinal principle of bureaucracy is that it is expected to apply rules impartially and act impartially.[60] This principle will be undermined now. Further, as pointed out in the judgement of Sahai, J.,[61] 'What cannot furnish basis for exercise of electoral right and is Constitutionally prohibited . . . cannot furnish valid basis for Constitutional functioning under Article 16(4).'

At the legal level the majority judgement marks a regression from the trend of elimination of caste requirements in enacted law. For example, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 (HMA) and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956 (HAMA) make no reference to caste as a requirement, thereby facilitating inter-caste marriages and adoptions. Now that caste has been resurrected on a large scale in connection with jobs, difficult questions will arise as to the caste status of a spouse or a child in inter-caste adoptions. A brief reference will be made to these aspects.

Kane points out[62] that 'even when *anuloma* marriages were allowed there is no unanimity among the sages and the smritis as to the status of the progeny of such unions'. He gives the three views existing on the question: The first view is that if a male of one varna

married a female of the varna immediately after it, the progeny belonged to the varna of the father. The second is that the progeny of anuloma unions is in status lower than the father, but higher than the mother. The third view (which prevails commonly) is that the progeny of the anuloma marriages is of the same varna as regards its privileges and obligations as that of the mother. To these we must add the complications that arise under the Constitution, namely equality of sexes and special consideration for the rights of a child.

Some of these questions have already come up before the courts in the context of reservations in favour of Scheduled Castes. Can a woman belonging to a forward caste, on her marriage with a person belonging to a Scheduled Caste, be entitled to the benefit of reservation? The Delhi High Court took the view that she had no right to the benefit.[63] On the other hand, in a recent case where a Vaishya woman married a man from the Besta community (fishermen caste), a single judge of the AP High Court held that she could claim reservation as one belonging to the caste of her husband. The judge observed that on marriage a woman takes the surname, gotra of her husband and that she should therefore be entitled to such a benefit.[64] To add to the confusion, even the decisions of the same High Court are not reconcilable. The AP High Court, prior to this decision, in the case where a Brahmin woman married a Scheduled Caste man, held that she had no claim to get a post reserved for the Scheduled Caste.[65]

As of now the High Courts differ on the question of the right of an adopted child to claim reservation on the basis of the caste of the adoptive family. In a case where a Jat boy was adopted by a member of the Scheduled Castes, the Delhi High Court took the view that the adoptee was entitled the caste-status of his adoptive father.[66] The court relied on the language of HAMA which said that on adoption an adopted child shall be deemed to be the child of the adoptive family 'for all purposes'. But the Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka High Courts took a different view. Where a girl born in an upper caste applied for a seat in a medical college on the basis of a Scheduled Caste certificate obtained on adoption, the AP High Court held that her claim was not valid.[67] The court was of the view

that the child must satisfy that he or she not only belonged to the homogeneous group but also suffered all the handicaps and disadvantages which a member of that group was subject to. Apart from these aspects there is the intractable problem of production of false caste certificates and false claims to backward status.

Surprisingly, women have not been identified as backward, even though they are backward beyond dispute in terms of education, employment, and ownership of resources. It may be noted that reservations exist in their favour in some states e.g., 30 per cent in Tamil Nadu[68] and in Andhra Pradesh. The fear that women of advanced sections will snatch away the benefits is not justified as 'creamy layers' are to be excluded.

On two other aspects the policies of the Central government will be watched with interest. The first concerns the categories of services that will be excluded from the purview of reservation. If the list is large, the government will be accused of defeating the policy of reservations. If it is small, efficiency in administration will suffer. A. M. Shah's study points out that the policy relating to exempting posts from reservation on the ground of efficiency lacked purpose and direction and was characterized by non-availability of information.[69] Initially at least the existing confusion will be aggravated.[70] Further, the illustrative list given in the judgement itself will give rise to difficulties. For example, Justice Sawant preferred the exclusion of the teaching profession from reservation, whereas the majority judgement mentioned only 'teaching posts of professors'. Should the term professors be understood in its popular and wide meaning as 'any teacher or instructor' in a college or university, or in its narrow sense confined to those holding chairs in a university?

Second, an honest identification of 'creamy layers' is necessary for the proper implementation of the policy of reservations. But given the strong tendency on the part of politicians to promote their personal and electoral interests, one will have to await developments in this regard.

While this work is in Press, it has been reported that the Supreme Court struck down the economic criteria fixed by the government of

UP and Bihar for the identification of creamy layers. These, among other things, laid down that in order to be designated as creamy layers professionals should have an annual income of ten lakhs; and in case of I.A.S. or I.P.S. or other Central government officers they should satisfy the following conditions: they should draw a salary of Rs 10,000 per month, the husband or wife should be a graduate and own a house in an urban area.[71]

To what extent will there be a uniform identification on 'creamy layers' in different states? A national policy in this regard is desirable.

The judgement revives caste among Muslims and Hindus. There is a hope that 'creamy layers' will give rise to classes in castes. All in all caste is as strong and vibrant at the turn of the twenty-first century as it was at the turn of the twentieth century.

Notes and References

1. Article 16(1): There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State.
2. Article 16(4): Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provisions for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services of the State.
3. Article 15(4): Nothing in this article or in clause (2) of article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.
4. *Report of Backward Classes Commission* (K. Kalelkar, Chairman) (1955, Manager of Publications, Delhi).
5. Clause (3) of Article 338 has been renumbered as Clause (10) by the Constitution (Sixty-fifth Amendment) Act, 1990. It states: 'In this article, references to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be construed as including references to such other backward classes as the President may, on receipt of the report of a Commission appointed under clause (1) of Article 340, by order specify and also to the Anglo-Indian community'.
6. This has been cited in the opinion of Justice Jeevan Reddy at page 506. It is to be noted that the page numbers and paras refer to the report published by *All India Reporter (A.I.R.)*.
7. The leading judgement will also be referred to as the majority judgement, or Justice Jeevan Reddy's judgement or opinion.

8. The questions are given in pp. 516-17 of the *Report.*
9. At p.676 (majority opinion) and at p.761 (Sahai, J.).
10. The criteria (indicators) at p.510 of the *Report.*
11. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 557.
12. *Ibid.*, 613.
13. *State of Kerala vs. N.M. Thomas*, *A.I.R.* 1976 S.C. 490 at 527.
14. Nickel, J.W. 'Preferential policies in hiring and admissions: A jurisprudential approach', 75 *Columbia Law Review* 537 (1975).
15. *Supra* note 11 at 615.
16. *A.I.R.* 1976 S.C. 490 at 517-18.
17. Reich, Charles 'New Property' 73 *Yale Law Journal* 733 (1964).
18. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 697.
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21. Srinivas, M. N. *Caste in Modern Indian and Other Essays* 40 (1968 Reprint, Media Promoters and Publishers, Bombay).
22. *Balaji vs State of Mysore*, *A.I.R.*, 1963 S.C. 649.
23. *Rajendra vs Union of India*, *A.I.R.*, 1968 S.C. 507.
24. *Periakaruppan vs State of Tamil Nadu*, *A.I.R.*, 1971 S.C. 2303.
25. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 550-51.
26. *Ibid.*, 552.
27. *A.I.R.*, 1969 S.C. 1.
28. *A.I.R.*, 1972 S.C. 1375.
29. *A.I.R.*, 1993, S.C. 477 at 553.
30. Article 46: 'The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes . . .'
31. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 656.
32. *A.I.R.*, 1973 S.C. 930 at 936.
33. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 557.
34. *Ibid.*, 563.
35. *Ibid.*, 657.
36. *Ibid.*, 557.
37. *Ibid.*, 560.
38. *Ibid.*, 554.
39. *Ibid.*, 555.
40. *Ibid.*
41. See Sivaramayya, B., *Inequalities and the Law* 56 (1984, Eastern Book Company, Lucknow).
42. *K.S. Jayasree vs State of Kerala* (1977), *(I) SCR* 194.
43. K.S. Vasanth Kumar vs State of Karnataka, *A.I.R.*, 1985 S.C. 1495.
44. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 560.
45. *Ibid.*, 699.

46. *Ibid.*, 718.
47. *Ibid.*, 759.
48. *Ibid.*, 625-26.
49. Galanter, M., *Competing Equalities* 270 *et. seq.* (1991 paperback O.U.P. Delhi).
50. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 589.
51. *A.I.R.*, 1962 S.C. 36.
52. *Ibid.*, 44.
53. A.I.R. 1993 S.C. 477 at 570. In view of this explicit statement in the majority judgement and the concurrence of all other judges (barring Ahmadi, J. who expressed no opinion) the statement of the Union Welfare Minister, Mr Sitaram Kesari, that 'in the perception of the union government the Supreme Court judgement did not cover the SC and STs' is questionable as regards promotions. See *The Hindu* (Visakhapatnam) 23 February 1993 p.9, cols. 4 and 5.
54. *A.I.R.*, 1963 S.C. 36 at 44.
55. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 573.
56. *Janki Prasad Parimoo vs State of J & K.*, *A.I.R.*, 1973 S.C. 930 at 936.
57. K. S. Vasanth Kumar *vs* State of Karnataka, *A.I.R.*, 1985 S.C. 1495.
58. 1982 (1), *SCR*, 759.
59. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 746. For a sociological distinction between caste at ritual and political levels see Srinivas, M.N. *supra* note 21 at 5 & 6.
60. Béteille, A. 'The Problem', 268 *Seminar* 10 at 11 (1981).
61. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 746.
62. Kane, P.V. *History of Dharmasastra* 55, Vol.II pt.1 (1974, 2nd ed. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona).
63. *Urmila Ginda vs State*, *A.I.R.*, 1975 Del. 115.
64. *Dr R. Uma Devi vs Principal Kurnool Medical College* 1992 (3) *Andhra Law Times* 27 (Notes on Recent Cases). The judge said: 'When inter-caste marriages are not barred and . . . are lauded . . . it is ununderstable as to how the wife cannot be permitted to claim as belonging to her husband's caste'.
65. *K.V.L. Kameswari vs Andhra University* 1992 (2), *Andhra Law Times*, 13.
66. *Khazan Singh vs Union of India*, *A.I.R.*, 1980 Del. 60.
67. *A.S. Sailaja vs Principal, Kurnool Medical College*, *A.I.R.*, 1986 A.P. 209. The Karnataka decision is: Srinivasa vs. Chairman, Selection Committee, *A.I.R.*, 1981 Knt. 86.
68. See *Esther Kavitha vs State of Tamil Nadu*, *A.I.R.*, 1992 Mad. 359.
69. Shah, A. M. 'Job reservations and efficiency', *Economic and Political Weekly* 1732, 20 July 1991.
70. *A.I.R.*, 1993 S.C. 477 at 664.
71. *The Hindustan Times* dated 6 September, 1995, p.1, Cols: 1, 2 and 3. See also editorials in *The Hindustan Times* and *The Times of India* (Delhi) dated 7 September, 1995.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AMONG MUSLIMS IN INDIA

Zarina Bhatty

Throughout this century, egalitarianism has held sway over the thought processes which have determined the mainstream thinking on human social organization. But anthropologists studying various aspects of social organization across a good part of the world have been preoccupied with ranking people by groups. Besides finding that people tend to be ranked by groups in very many societies, they have identified two major systems of social ranking, one based on caste and the other on class.

Most scholars of South Asian societies use the caste framework to analyse the system of social stratification prevalent in them. They find that the essential elements of the original Hindu caste system of the Indian subcontinent are basic to determining the rank order of social groupings in these societies. Some scholars, however, take a different view on the ground that the concept of caste is specific to Hindu societies and should not be imposed on others.

Broadly speaking, two approaches to the phenomenon of caste can be distinguished in sociological literature — the cultural and the structural. The former, adopted by, for instance, Dumont (1970) and Leach (1960), emphasizes the uniqueness of the caste system which is peculiar to Hindu society. The concepts of ritual purity and impurity are viewed here as central to the caste system, and they are found either lacking or too weak in comparable societies. The

structural approach, on the other hand, regards caste as a mechanism for social stratification and determines social structure in terms of status groups. Conceived thus, the concept of caste can be used to understand status groups in non-Hindu societies as well.

It was Max Weber (1947) who, for the first time, drew attention to the caste system as a hierarchy of status groups and went on to define it as a system of 'frozen status groups', emphasizing thereby the extreme rigidity of the system and the unchangeability of the caste-dependent status which was determined, once and for all, by birth. A number of contemporary anthropologists — Ahmad (1978), Lindholm (1986), Barth (1969) and others — agree with Weber's structural approach and have employed the concept of caste to analyse social stratification systems in non-Hindu South Asian societies.

One particularly significant testing ground for the structural approach has been the existence of caste among the Muslims in India and Pakistan. It is unfortunate that for long the Muslims of the subcontinent failed to attract the attention of anthropologists who studied this region. Only in the last twenty years or so a number of studies have surfaced on this rather barren scene of anthropological scholarship. Major works among these are the four volumes on Indian Muslims edited by Imtiaz Ahmad called *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India, Muslim Communities in South Asia* edited by T. N. Madan (1976), and a study of Muslims of Swat in Pakistan by Frederick Barth in Leach (ed.) *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*. Most of the authors in these volumes treat Muslim status groups in a caste rather than a class framework and argue that although Muslim status groups do not fit into the Hindu caste model perfectly, they are more analogous to caste than to class.

Islamic scholars find the use of the term caste for Muslim social groups distasteful, as they claim Islam is an egalitarian religion. One of the premises of Islam is that there are no social classes and all Muslims are equal in the eyes of God. It is pointed out that there were revelations to Prophet Mohammed that birth did not count for anything and that religious zeal was the prime criterion for honour.

The Koran says, 'O ye folk, verily I have created you of male and female . . . verily the most honourable in the sight of God is the most pious of you' (Levy, 1957:55). A well-known Hadis (saying of the Prophet) states that, 'there are no genealogies in Islam' (*ibid*). Despite such Koranic instruction, there are no records to suggest that the egalitarian ideal was ever practised in any Muslim society. In the very beginning of the Islamic era in Arabia, Caliph Omar is reported to have distributed the spoils of war not equally but in proportion to the length of time since a person's conversion to Islam. When Islam spread beyond Arabia, the Bedouins regarded themselves superior to the new converts. The dating of conversion to determine social status is still prevalent in India, where recent converts to Islam, referred to as Nau-Muslims (New Muslims), are treated as belonging to a lower social status by Muslims of longer standing.

Indian Muslim society, as recorded by historians, practised a fairly elaborate system of social stratification ever since the beginning of Muslim rule in India. Ashraf, in his social history of Muslim rule in India, affirms the existence of social stratification in Muslim society, similar to that among Hindus. Ashraf refers to three distinct social groups during Humayun's time: Ahl-e-Kalam (the religious intelligentsia), Ahl-e-Tegh (the warriors) and Ahl-e-Murad (those that catered to the comforts and pleasures of the higher income groups). Ahl-e-Murad included professional musicians, court dancers and the artisans (Ashraf 1932). Yaseen, another historian of the Mughal period, recounts that greater honour and respect was given to Muslims of foreign descent, who also constituted the ruling class, than to those of Indian origin, most of whom were recent converts. People were therefore given to inventing foreign ancestry in order to raise their social status (Yaseen 1957).

The existence of clearly differentiated social groups among Muslims, on a basis similar to that mentioned by Ashraf and Yaseen, was also observed during the early British period. Ibbetson writes of Muslim converts in Punjab as follows: 'As a fact, in early Punjab, conversion (to Islam) had absolutely no effect on the caste of the convert — his social customs are unaltered, his rules of marriage and inheritance are unchanged and almost the only difference is that

he (the Muslim) shaves his scalp lock and the upper part of his moustache, repeats the Mohammaden Creed in the mosque and adds Musalman to the Hindu Wedding ceremonies' (Ibbetson 1916:14). Contemporary Muslim society closely reflects this historical account not only in the Punjab but everywhere in India.

Several contemporary social anthropologists (Ansari 1976; Ahmad *ibid*; Madan 1976; Barth *ibid*; Alavi 1976), who have studied Muslim society in India and Pakistan have endeavoured to understand the Muslim social order as the product of a dynamic interplay between Islamic ideology and the socio-economic and historical forces in South Asian societies. The study of Indian Muslims on which this essay is based demonstrates that the prevailing social stratification among Indian Muslims is more a historical result of socio-economic realities than of Islamic ideology, particularly in its egalitarian aspect. By focussing on recent changes in socio-economic as well as political forces in India, it can also be demonstrated that these changes are continuing to make an impact on the stratification patterns among Muslims. The direction of change in the social structure is towards making stratification more fluid (i.e., easier for an individual to change his or her status in the hierarchy), and not towards bringing about a more egalitarian social structure.

In what follows I shall rely on data from Kasauli (pseudonym), a Muslim village in Uttar Pradesh, which I studied extensively twenty years ago, and have since kept in touch with, to observe and assess the changes that have taken place over time.

I have found that the system of social stratification among Muslims can be best understood within a caste framework. Elsewhere (Bhatty 1978) I have argued that the Muslims in Kasauli had a caste system similar to that of the Hindus, and that the Muslim caste structure had its roots in a politico-economic system which was feudal and a part and parcel of the prevailing Hindu feudal system in India. However, since 1947 when India gained independence, a wide range of policy initiatives, both political and economic, have been taken to democratize society and to hasten the processes of economic development as well as to extend opportunities of advancement to all social strata. The resulting changes in the politico-economic

environment, as one would expect, has affected the nature of social stratification in general, and also among Muslims. The question that needs to be examined is whether changes in social stratification continue to take place within the broad caste framework, or whether there is some movement towards a class-oriented stratification. This question will be addressed here in the context of Muslim society.

In recent years religious fundamentalism has acquired a new dimension in India, which, among Muslims, is being used to emphasize Muslim identity (as distinct from the Hindu). Fundamentalist religious leadership is consequently focussing on the distinctive features of Islam and Islamic society. One of the distinctive features of Islamic ideology is the unequivocal requirement for an undifferentiated structure where all believers, being equal in the eyes of Allah, unify society into a homogeneous entity. In the context of prevailing caste-like divisions among Muslims it would be interesting to examine whether and to what extent the fundamentalist pursuit of highlighting Muslim identity has stressed the Islamic egalitarian ethos.

Kasauli is an old zamindari settlement in the erstwhile Oudh region of Uttar Pradesh in the district of Barabanki, 40 kilometres east of Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. The population of Kasauli comprises of Hindus and Muslims, with the latter having a slight numerical edge over the former. A dominant lineage of Kidwais has held both economic and political sway locally by virtue of owning most of the cultivable land in and around the village. Also, an elaborate jajmani system which regulates inter-group relationships between high status and low status groups, has continued to be in operation. These two groups have distinct caste-like attributes.

It is generally agreed that the basic attributes of Hindu caste are endogamy, commensality, hierarchy, determination of status by birth and occupation. Using these attributes as criteria, Muslim status groups and their structuring in Kasauli come close to the Hindu caste system. Although notions of purity and impurity have no scriptural sanction in Islam, occupations are hierarchically arranged on the basis of these ideas, the degree of impurity of the occupation being a major determinant of the rank of a caste.

Muslims in India are sharply divided into two categories, Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs. The former have a superior status derived from their foreign ancestry. The Ashrafs, or those who claim a foreign descent, are further divided into four castes, Sayyads, Shiekhs, Mughals and Pathans, in that order of rank. The non-Ashrafs are alleged to be converts from Hinduism, and are therefore drawn from the indigenous population. They, in turn, are divided into a number of occupational castes.

In Kasauli the term 'zat' equivalent to 'jati' in the Hindu caste system, is used to refer to caste, and the Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs are collectively referred to as 'oonchi zat' (high caste) and 'neechi zat' (low caste) respectively. Interactions between the oonchi zat and neechi zat are regulated by established patron-client relationships of the jajmani system. The patrons, who belong to the oonchi zat, are referred to as the jajmanis, and the clients, comprising the various occupational castes of the neechi zat, as kamin. The kamins, who are attached to the dominant Ashraf lineage in a hereditary relationship, provide specialized services to its members for customary payments in cash or kind. The kamins are provided house sites by their jajmans and can also get land on lease from the jajmans for cultivation.

Like the Ashraf castes, which are ranked hierachically, the non-Ashraf castes also relate to each other in a hierarchical manner. In their case the superiority or inferiority of a caste is determined by the relatively pure or impure nature of the occupation associated with each. The dominant lineage of the Kidwais enjoys a uniformly superior status to all the non-Ashraf castes. The Kidwais claim to be Sayyads but the other Ashraf castes of Kasauli doubt the authenticity of their claim, and believe that Kidwais are a sub-caste of Sheikhs. The Kidwais' claim to Sayyad ancestry is however not openly challenged because of their economic superiority. The non-Ashraf castes exhibit a duality in their status, as each caste is superior or inferior to other non-Ashraf castes but always inferior to Ashraf castes.

Among Kasauli Muslims, the first and foremost criterion for grading non-Ashraf castes was the degree of impurity or pollution

implicit in the nature of their occupation. In addition, there was another related criterion, viz. physical proximity of a non-Ashraf caste to Ashraf castes while performing services for them. Mirasis (singers) were thus higher than Nais (barbers), and both higher than Dhobi (laundrymen). Mirasis were higher than Nais because Mirasi women sat among Ashraf ladies to sing and singing had no polluting connotation. Women of the Nai caste who massaged Ashraf women and Nai men who cut hair performed services in physical proximity to the Ashraf caste but were rated lower than Mirasis because both services were regarded as impure. On the other hand, the Dhobi not only washed dirty clothes, which was a polluting occupation, their services did not require physical proximity to the Ashrafs and hence they were still lower in the caste hierarchy.

Things are not only impure or pure, but some things are more impure than others. In the course of practising their traditional occupation, castes which habitually handle very impure things are lower in status than those which handle things which are not so impure. These ideas hold good for the non-Ashraf castes in Kasauli. Human secretions (particularly nightsoil), dead animals and animals eating filth (pigs), are regarded as the most polluting, and occupations associated with them occupy the lowest rungs in the caste hierarchy. These castes are also regarded as unclean. In their case, group pollution also attaches to individual members of the caste. Consequently, physical contact with individuals of these castes is avoided not only by Ashrafs but also by non-Ashrafs. Among the Muslims, if a person accidentally touches an individual of an unclean caste, the former must purify himself by a simple bath, particularly prior to performing a religious function like saying 'namaz', reading the Koran or entering a mosque. There is a difference here between Muslims and Hindus, and it lies in the fact that, unlike among Hindus, no elaborate rituals are prescribed for Muslims for purifying themselves in the event of physical contact with an individual from an unclean caste.

A person can be polluted not only by touching an individual of an unclean caste but also by coming in contact with an impure substance. Among Muslims all human secretions are 'najis' or polluting. Thus

a woman during her periods is 'najis' irrespective of her caste and must abstain from saying 'namaz', ritual fasting, entering a holy place or partaking food on which the 'fateha' (Koranic verses) have been recited. A man and woman are both 'najis' after sexual intercourse. If a child wets a person he (or she) becomes 'najis'. Here again 'nijasat', the state of being 'najis', is removed by having a bath. A distinction is made here between personal pollution caused by contact with human secretions and group pollution related to an occupation which involves direct physical contact with human emissions and waste, as in the case of Dhobis or Bhangis. Personal pollution is not transferred to another person whereas a person belonging to an unclean caste like the Dhobi or Bhangi can pollute others by touch.

Frederick Barth approximates the Swat 'Quoms' (social groups) to Hindu castes. He considers a 'Quom' to be too rigidly separated to be described as class. He also asserts that Swat Muslims practise a ritual-based system of social stratification, for Swat Quoms who deal with human emissions are ranked the lowest (Barth 1969).

Bhattacharya in his study of Bengal (India) Muslims also claims that the concepts of purity and impurity exist among them and are applicable in inter-group relationships, as the notions of hygiene and cleanliness in a person are related to the person's social position and not to his/her economic status (Bhattacharya 1978).

Status differentiation implicit in the caste system finds expression in restrictions on marriage and eating together. In Kasauli caste endogamy is strictly adhered to, both among Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs. The four Ashraf castes are divided into two endogamous groups. Sayyads and Sheikhs inter-marry with a tendency towards hypergamy and so do Mughals and Pathans. Marriage alliances between Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs are still inconceivable and not a single instance of this is known to have occurred in living memory in Kasauli. In another predominantly Muslim village in the same district, a marriage did occur once between a non-Ashraf man and an Ashraf girl. But social disapproval was so persistent and intense that the couple was forced finally to migrate to Pakistan. In another instance a member of a dominant lineage in a village in Lucknow

district married a Muslim woman as a second wife. She was alleged to have belonged to the Dhobi caste. She was treated well by the husband who, in terms of clothes, jewellery, etc., provided for her equally (according to Koranic instructions as he understood them), but she was never socially accepted by the Ashrafs. On ceremonial occasions she had to retire to her quarters before mealtime, as Ashraf ladies would not eat with her. It was also understood that children born of her would not get Ashraf spouses, and as a matter of fact, they did not.

Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs do not eat together in Kasauli. Between the two endogamous subdivisions of Ashrafs there is no restriction on eating together, but their interaction is so limited that, in practice, it rarely occurs.

Caste in Kasauli represents a cluster of statuses — social, political, economic and ritual. The last, in conjunction with social and economic status, has been dealt with in some detail on account of the controversy that centres around it. The political aspect of caste finds expression through the institution of the caste panchayat (a committee of elders) and a well-entrenched concept of biradari (literally, brotherhood).

Each non-Ashraf caste in Kasauli has a caste panchayat which regulates both intra-caste and inter-caste (among the non-Ashrafs) interactions and personal conduct. Caste panchayats have the right to settle disputes relating to property or personal matters, such as petty theft, boundary encroachments on individually owned land, divorce, disputes over dowry and the custody of children. Caste panchayats are also empowered to punish, the punishments ranging from fines to expulsion from the biradari. The latter, which is an extreme punishment, is referred to as stopping hukka-pani, which amounts to barring the offender from sitting and eating with fellow caste members, and further includes a severe economic sanction which prevents the offender from following the caste occupation.

The concept of biradari and caste panchayat are almost inseparable as the economic and political solidarity of a caste is expressed through the biradari and is regulated through the panchayat. Thus there is, for instance, a Julaha (weavers) biradari

or a Kasai (butchers) biradari, neither of whom admit into their fold weavers or butchers who may professionally perform their functions but do not belong to the Julaha or Kasai castes. Such persons or families continue to belong to the biradari of their origin — a fact that stresses the strict caste basis of biradari.

Hamza Alavi (1976), in his study of villages in the Punjab province of Pakistan, refers to biradari as having a political dimension because one can be expelled from it. But he attributes greater significance to the expression of kinship solidarity through the biradaris because of the inclusion in biradaris of both maternal and paternal kin who are engaged in the same occupation. In Kasauli too, each caste being endogamous, biradaris, by virtue of caste endogamy, are composed of both maternal and paternal kin. But, besides safeguarding caste solidarity, biradari panchayats also play a well-defined political role in regulating personal conduct with the help of established biradari norms, and in dealing with inter-biradari matters.

In Kasauli, Ashrafs too have biradaris — the Sayyad biradari or the Sheikh biradari, for instance — but these exist mainly to define the boundaries of their caste, for there are no panchayats. Biradari solidarity, however, is expressed on ceremonial occasions, when all members of the biradari are invited. Keeping the honour of the biradari is as important as it is among the non-Ashrafs. In the absence of a panchayat, an Ashraf biradari does not have an organ for expressing collective disapproval let alone punishing those committing offences against the caste code. Nor are disputes resolved by the biradari, with the result that they are taken to the law courts.

Thus it was found that Kasauli Muslims functioned on a caste basis, each group or sub-caste being endogamous, and membership of the group being determined by birth. Further, all groups were hierarchically arranged, the hierarchy being determined by ancestry and by the nature of the occupation associated with each group. Conformity to the system was ensured by exerting economic and political pressure through caste panchayats, and caste solidarity was maintained through biradari sentiments. Relations and interactions between the two major segments of the society — Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs — were governed by the jajmani system.

Soon after Independence, India initiated a policy of land reforms. This led to the Uttar Pradesh Land Reform and Abolition of Zamindari Bill which came into effect in 1950. Through this legislation absentee landlordism was abolished and the right of the tiller to the land established. In addition, a ceiling on the ownership of agricultural land was fixed. Provisions of the land reform legislation clearly threatened the supremacy of the dominant lineage, which had controlled the politico-economic system of the village by virtue of owning most of the cultivable land through the traditional allegiance of the non-Ashrafs rooted in the jajmani system. But as a matter of actual fact, the impact of the legislation in Kasauli was muted, and what should have caused a major dent in the prevailing social structure ended up by making only minor fissures.

The dominant Kidwai lineage, through clever manipulation, managed to keep a substantial proportion of the cultivated land under their control, and continued to lease out land by designating their tenants as hired field-servants. The non-Ashraf castes, on their part, accepted the arrangement. For, while the non-Ashraf population was rising, the demand for their specialized services was dwindling because the younger members of the dominant lineage were going out of the village for higher education and taking up urban jobs. Meanwhile younger members of the non-Ashraf castes were beginning to migrate to the neighbouring towns of Barabanki and Lucknow in search of employment opportunities which had begun to expand. While this siphoned off some of the increase in the number of non-Ashrafs in the village, it also adversely affected the demand for services. On balance the non-Ashrafs found the opportunities for making a living from their own specialized occupations in the village inadequate and were eager to look for land to cultivate. This suited the Kidwais who needed loyal tenants willing to be labelled servants. Thus the dependence of the occupational castes on the dominant lineage, despite the decline in the demand for their specialized services, continued. And so the traditional social structure and the jajmani system were sustained, and the destabilizing impact of external economic and political changes was deflected.

However, the processes of economic change and development,

and the political restructuring of the society that had been set in motion, were in progress, and Kasauli could not be insulated from them. In time Kasauli was connected with a pukka all-weather road, and a twice-a-day bus service to the district town of Barabanki was introduced. A sugarcane factory was located near the village, which led to a major shift in the local cropping pattern with the high value sugarcane and poppy seeds becoming the preferred crops. Other infrastructural developments included a primary school in a brick building, a hospital with beds for in-patients and facilities for minor operations, a post office, grain storage facilities, and electricity. All of these raised the productivity of agricultural land, expanded employment opportunities, increased household incomes, and generally improved the quality of life. Trade expanded, there were more shops in the village market which sold a larger variety of goods, and lighted streets greatly enlivened the marketplace.

Meanwhile the Kidwais were quick to sense that new avenues of power were being created and their position of dominance could no longer be sustained simply by land ownership. They realized that to retain economic power it was necessary to have political leverage and acquire control over key institutions which were being set up to support the process of development. The Kidwais therefore manoeuvred to have one of their lineage members elected to the State Legislative Assembly (who subsequently moved up to become a Cabinet Minister at the Centre). They also managed to place one of their members as Chairman of the District Cooperative Bank, and another as the General Secretary of the Uttar Pradesh Sugarcane Association. Having inveigled themselves in political decision-making processes, the Kidwais were in a position to claim a good part of the credit for the policy-induced developments that had taken place — a claim that was widely accepted. This, of course, was just what the Kidwais wanted, for they saw in the retention of the traditional social structure the source for their continued dominance, and being seen in the role of a benefactor directly endorsed the traditional dependent status of the non-Ashrafs. Jajmani relationships therefore persisted. Most of the Kidwai weddings even now take place in the village and traditional services of the occupational castes

such as Nais (barbers) and Mirasis (singers) continue to be provided.

But this notwithstanding, the jajmani system in operation is not what it used to be; it has clearly weakened. There are two major reasons for this. First, younger members of the non-Ashraf castes continue to move out of the village to take up jobs in towns and cities. They are able to do this on two counts: One, due to the growth of industry and urban infrastructure, the urban labour market is expanding much more rapidly than the rural labour market and two, non-Ashrafs being of the 'neechi' (low) caste have almost no caste-based inhibitions in accepting any of a wide range of jobs which are not included in the traditional set of rural occupations. Thus it is principally the older generation that is holding on to the jajmani relationship mainly on account of a single factor: the ability to lease land from the dominant lineage by virtue of their hereditary attachment. Second, the substitution of a tenancy relationship for a relationship based on specialized services has by itself weakened the jajmani system, because the major part of a tenant's income is derived from the cultivation of land and not from a service directly rendered to the jajman as a person. Furthermore, with the advent of the Green Revolution and a shift to a more profitable cropping pattern, the economic strength of the tenant has improved significantly and rendered the spurious tenancy relationship more tenuous.

In the wake of these economic developments and the consequent weakening of the jajmani system, certain social and cultural changes have also followed, as exemplified by instances of revolt. Perhaps the first revolt was staged (though unsuccessfully) by a Mirasi (singer caste) youth. Having acquired some education he had elected to move out to the nearby city of Lucknow to take up a job with the State Roadways. In due course he was engaged to a girl of his own caste in the village. The girl and her mother along with other members of the family sang on ceremonial occasions as was required by tradition. Her fiancé objected to it in an effort to dissociate himself from the traditional occupation of singing, thereby trying to raise his caste status. But the girl's family, whose livelihood still depended on singing and who were bound to the dominant lineage under the

jajmani system, could not afford to withdraw their daughter from their traditional occupation, particularly since it was bound to cause an offence to the dominant lineage. The engagement was ultimately broken.

Besides breaking away from the traditional occupation which represented a major dent in case solidarity and a challenge to the occupation-based caste system, the desire for upward social mobility among non-Ashrafs found other behavioural expressions also. The entire process described as 'Sanskritization' by Srinivas (1966) in the context of the Hindu caste system was much in evidence in the Muslim society of Kasauli also.[1] A major component of the Sanskritization process was the withdrawal of women from economic activity and their retreat into purdah (seclusion). Women not engaging directly in economic activities and observing purdah were characteristic of the Ashrafs and therefore conformity with these customs became a means for upward social mobility. The following case is an example. Women of the Manihar caste (bangle makers) have been traditionally vending bangles in the villages. One member of a Manihar family broke away from the traditional occupation and, after acquiring a record player and hiring a loudspeaker, began providing music at weddings and ceremonial functions. This gave him a substantially higher income, which led him to stop his mother and sisters from vending bangles and to insist that they go into purdah. Interestingly while the sister complied, the mother did not. She felt that since the extended family was still attached to the dominant lineage under the jajmani system, she must continue to supply bangles to the Kidwai women. The latter, of course, ridiculed the family's attempt at acquiring respectability.

While the non-Ashrafs were expressing their desire for upward social mobility by adopting behaviour patterns of the Ashrafs, the latter were relinquishing tradition for a more Western style of life. Srinivas' Sanskritization – Westernization continuum (Srinivas *ibid*) was clearly visible in Kasauli. Women of the dominant lineage of Kidwais have abandoned purdah. They have gone for education and are taking up employment in cities. Today there are medical doctors among Kidwai women, as well as journalists, teachers and

parliamentarians. Contrary to this trend among the Ashrafs, the non-Ashrafs, in pursuit of raising their social status, continue to adopt certain behaviour patterns traditionally associated with the Ashrafs which they are themselves fast giving up.

Another common expression of upward mobility among non-Ashrafs is the adoption of Ashraf names, including surnames. Traditionally non-Ashrafs did not have Persianised Urdu names as did the Ashrafs. Instead they had nondescript names, usually derived from the local dialect. A common practice was to call a boy Jumman if he was born on a Friday (Jumma) or Barsati if born during the rainy reason (barsat) and so on. Now the non-Ashrafs give their children the same kind of names as do the Ashrafs, including those drawn from the prophet's family, such as Fatima or Ayesha. This practice, though resented by the Ashrafs who regard it as 'cheeky', is progressively being accepted as an inevitable part of what they describe as the 'equality wave'.

A major consequence of the changes that were taking place was the erosion of the power reposed in the caste panchayat and the consequent decline in its effectiveness as an institution. The most effective instrument that the panchayat had for exercising power and ensuring compliance with its decisions was the threat of outcasting, which meant, among other things, the loss of a profession. This threat was no longer operative as more and more non-Ashrafs were migrating to cities and finding more lucrative employment. Incidents of the defiance of the panchayat's authority began to multiply. One such incident relates to a Kasai (butcher caste) who was having an affair with a married woman. The matter was taken up by the panchayat and the behaviour of the Kasai was condemned as it affected the honour, not only of the families concerned but also of the Kasai biradari. He was asked to reform his behaviour but the Kasai did not comply. The panchayat then humiliated him and expelled him from the caste. The Kasai simply left the village along with his paramour and set up a shop in a distant town. Thus, changes in the economic environment were not only threatening the political power of the dominant lineage but also of the caste panchayat, which, in turn, was undermining caste solidarity.

A majority of the Kidwais have moved out to cities, but some still live in the village and look after farming. The family home is also maintained. But they have been losing their political clout and economic power. Recently one of them lost the State Assembly election from his home constituency; another, who had earlier won an election from her home constituency adopted another constituency, having sensed the loss of power at home. The jajmani relationship, considerably weakened, has not completely disappeared. Essentially it is sustained by the need of the older generation for land to cultivate which is owned by the dominant lineage. It seems clear that the jajmani system on the basis of a tenancy relationship cannot be sustained for long.

The trend towards this end, already sided by the progressive dissociation of caste and occupation in urban areas, is likely to be hastened as the rural-urban linkage becomes much stronger with the greater expansion of industry and infrastructure. Given that the caste-occupation link has become less rigid, caste solidarity and institutions based on it weaker, and members of the dominant lineage find themselves drawn to the cities suggesting a dwindling interest in their rural heritage, the social structure that was based on caste hierarchy and the jajmani system is progressively moving towards a more class-like stratification of social groups. It should be stressed, however, that caste has continued to be an undiminished reality and is still determined by birth. What one envisages therefore is that for quite some time to come a dual basis of social stratification may persist, one by class and another by caste.

Reference was made earlier to scholars who have tended to view the Muslim social order as determined by an interaction between socio-economic and historical forces on the one hand, and Islamic ideology, on the other. In my study of Kasauli, I found evidence of this interaction in the absence of any ritual procedure by which a Muslim, polluted by the touch of an individual of an unclean caste, or by contact with an unclean substance, purified himself. This was simply because, unlike for Hindus, there were no prescribed rituals for this purpose in Islam. This is a rather superficial reason, for it does not contradict the acceptance of the ritualistic concept of purity

and impurity, nor does it assert the equalitarian basis of Islamic ideology. Another feature unique to Muslim society is the concept on which a line is drawn between Ashrafs and Non-Ashrafs. This, as explained earlier, is based on the relative length of genealogical time over which a person's ancestry has belonged to the Muslim faith and is reduced, in practice, to a simple division between those with a claim to foreign ancestry, and converts to Islam from the indigenous population. This is different from the Hindu system where the idea underlying stratification is uniform. However, in this case too, the difference cannot be traced to Islamic ideology, but rather to the historical evolution of Muslim society. The insulation of the social order from the egalitarian ideology of Islam observed here is indeed crucial to understanding the relationship between the recent upsurge of Muslim fundamentalism and Muslim social stratification.

The casualty of the recent emergence of fundamentalism in India — Sikh, Hindu or Muslim — is complex. But in the case of the Muslims it has resulted in an assertion of their identity as distinct from that of the others. The fundamentalist leaders who are behind the move and have determined its direction, have aimed at: (a) making the Muslim — individual and community — visibly more Muslim; and (b) attaining greater unity among Muslims as a political entity, thereby enhancing the community's relevance. The former manifests itself in such practices as blaring of the azan (call of worship) over loudspeakers, holding of milads (religious gatherings), and iftar (snacks partaken at breaking of fast) parties during Ramadan. To this one must add the effort to revive madrasas (schools) which emphasize traditional religious education, and an insistence that Muslim Personal Law be retained *in toto*. The latter is reflected in the entry of Muslim fundamentalist leaders into the political arena and their attempt to unify Muslims in their response to political issues and to gain political clout in national politics.

Thus it will be seen that neither aspect of the fundamentalist thrust to assert Muslim identity brings Muslim ideology to bear on the caste-determined social stratification of Muslim society. Indeed it would seem that the revivalist endeavours in the current phase of Muslim fundamentalism in India are essentially directed at creating

political space for the community and securing conformity in religious conduct at the personal level. It could be that the emphasis on the norms of behaviour that have historically evolved in Indian Muslim society (not Islamic ideology) has excluded the prevailing social order among Muslims from fundamentalist concerns, because having been adopted and endogenised, the social order has become normative and a part of the Indian Muslim tradition.

Notes

1. Imtiaz Ahmad, along with some other scholars, prefers to use the term 'Islamization' for this process but it suffers from the same limitation as Sanskritization. However, I do not see the need for a new term. In fact, I prefer Sanskritization for it does not bring religion directly into the concept.

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CASTE AMONG CHRISTIANS IN INDIA

J. Tharamangalam

It is widely known that caste exists among non-Hindus in India and that it is prevalent even in those non-Hindu religions which consciously repudiate caste and proclaim theologies and ideologies that oppose caste. Caste among Christians in India has survived many missionary onslaughts; and in Goa and Kerala some aspects of caste apparently survived even the tyranny of the inquisition. However, condemnation of caste as unchristian has re-emerged as an important theme in contemporary theological and official church discourse. Although such condemnations have generally not been accompanied by any action that disturbs the *status quo* within the churches, there is increasing pressure today from rising Dalit Christian movements supported by new radical theologies such as the theology of liberation and Dalit theology (Prabhakar 1988; Irudayaraj 1990), and by important sections of theologians and intellectuals within the churches.

But in what sense does caste exist among Christians? Admittedly, caste is complex and has many referents (Béteille, 1964). Some sociologists (Ahmad 1973; D'Costa 1977) have attempted to describe caste among non-Hindus by identifying a set of primary characteristics such as hereditary membership and endogamy. While this approach has the merit of staying close to observed reality, none

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of these characteristics except the Hindu religious ideas associated with it (purity-pollution, karma-dharma) appear to be specific to caste. This in itself should not pose any serious problem since we need not assume that caste is *sui generis* not comparable with other stratification systems. Dumont (1980), as is well known, has advanced an influential argument for defining and explaining caste in terms of a specifically Hindu master idea or grand design that can provide intellectual consistency to the complexities of caste. And he finds such a design in the Hindu religious concept of the pure and the impure and the consequent absolute distinction between status (defined in terms of purity) and power. Critics of Dumont have argued, I think quite convincingly, that such a neat and consistent grand design (and especially the absolute distinction between status and power) has, in reality, existed only in the Dharma Shastras, and perhaps also in the minds of the Brahmins who have been the ideologues and enforcers of the system. Fuller (1976:66), for example, argues that 'the notion that ordinary Hindus think with the clarity and in the same manner as the authors of the Brahmanas is inherently implausible'. In any case, it should be obvious that the conception of caste as being necessarily linked with specifically Hindu theological ideas will pose some serious problems in studying caste among Christians (and other non-Hindus). Dumont himself was forced to explain the reality of caste among non-Hindus in India (which he did not deny) by recourse to 'Hindu influence' over these groups, or of the performance of 'psychological dispositions' to the extent that 'each Muslim, Christian or Lingayat has something of the Hindu in him' (1980:211).

Fuller (1976:66) attempts to resolve the issue by making a distinction between theology and ideology. Theology 'has to do with some more or less coherent set of religious theories elaborated by religious specialists, and recorded in sacred texts; knowledge of theology is mainly confined to these specialists and other intellectuals.' Ideology 'refers to the much wider set of ideas about society and the world, about good, evil, etc., held by ordinary people' (1976:66). Both ordinary Christians and ordinary Hindus share a common ideology which sees 'politico-economic factors as highly

significant in the attribution of status' (1976:67). 'An ideological synthesis has taken place' (1976:67). While this is a useful distinction it underestimates the importance of the differences between Hindu and Christian ideologies and glosses over the ambiguous and problematic nature of all ideologies. There is not only a plurality of ideologies (including dominant and counter ideologies) but an essential ambiguity about them.

A major objective of this paper will be to understand the Christians' own conception of caste. How do Christians, high and low caste, construct their social world and define their identities with respect to caste? But their definition of caste will be seen as inextricably linked with their praxis, all embedded in an ensemble of historically constituted social, economic and political relationships. We shall, therefore, describe the major features of caste among Christians both in terms of behaviour and ideology. The relationship between caste and church politics and the emerging Christian Dalit movements will also be discussed. While considerable historical material will be used, the changes taking place in contemporary India will be stressed. It will be argued that caste can and does exist (in terms of the configuration of major characteristics) without any necessary linkage with the theological ideas of purity and pollution or karma and dharma.

The term Dalit (broken, oppressed in Sanskrit) is used in this paper to refer to the ex-Untouchables known also in the literature as Harijans, Depressed Classes or Scheduled Castes. Following the Dalit Panther writers in Maharashtra in the early 1970s the term has been adopted by the ex-Untouchables themselves as the preferred term for their self-definition. In this paper these terms will be used as synonymous and the actual term selected will depend on the context.

Christians in Indian Society

According to the 1981 census (Series 1, Household Population by Religion of Head of Household) there are roughly 16 million

Christians in India who make up 2.6 per cent of the country's population. Some 63 per cent of these are in the four southern states with about 32 per cent being in Kerala alone. Nevertheless, the Christian community reflects the general heterogeneity of the people of this vast country. Christians differ greatly not only in their theological, denominational and ritual traditions, but in ethnic, social and especially caste origin, in the material, social and cultural resources they command and in the general status accorded to them in Indian society. As we shall see later, caste cannot be completely divorced from the broader socio-economic setting in which Indian Christians find themselves.

The earliest Christian community in India is that of the Syrian Christians of Kerala (also known as Syrians, the Christians of St Thomas or simply the Thomas Christians) whose origins go back to the early centuries of the Christian era. According to their tradition they are descendants of upper caste (Namboothiri Brahmin) converts made by St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. A small group of endogamous Syrians (now Catholics and Jacobites) known as Knanaya Christians or 'Southerners' or 'Southists' claim to be directly descended from Syrian merchants who settled in Kerala in the fourth century under the leadership of Thomas of Cana. They consider themselves 'pure-blooded' and superior to the 'Northerners' or 'Northists' — who make up the vast majority of the Syrians — strictly enforce endogamy and do not accept converts from outside. When the Portuguese arrived on the Kerala coast in the sixteenth century the Syrians were a relatively wealthy community well integrated into Hindu society and enjoying high caste status. Soon the Portuguese began a campaign to bring the Syrians under their control and under the hegemony of the Roman Church. The Synod (church council) of Diamper (Udayamperur near Cochin) convened by Archbishop Alexis de Menezes of Goa anathematized many of their 'erroneous' beliefs and practices allegedly associated with the Nestorian 'heresy' of Persia or 'heathenism' (Hinduism), ordered the immediate severance of their historical connection with the Patriarch of Antioch, brought them under the authority of the Roman Pope, imposed on them the rituals and practices of the Latin rite,

and brought them under the jurisdiction of the inquisition of Goa (Geddes 1694; Zachariah 1976). Among the errors condemned were pollution observances associated with birth (Act IX, Decree V) and sexual intercourse (Act VII, Decree XVI), the belief in transmigration of souls and the doctrine that 'each one can be saved in his own law (and that) all laws are right' (Act III, Decree IV, Geddes 1694). Interestingly, the Syrians were allowed to continue their practice of Untouchability since this was necessary to carry on their daily social intercourse with the upper castes (and to advance Portuguese commercial interests). But the Synod condemned the 'superstitious' beliefs associated with the practice, and ordered them not to wash and purify themselves if they accidentally touched low caste persons (Act IX, Decree II, Geddes 1694). Sixty-four years after the Synod in 1653 the Syrians revolted and took a solemn oath touching a cross (*Koonan Kurishu Satyam*) never again to submit to Portuguese and apparently Roman authority (Brown 1956; Tisserent 1957; Mundadan 1984).

Those who thus broke away and then re-established their communion with the Patriarch of Antioch are known as the Jacobites. Those who continued to remain in communion with Rome, then a tiny minority but now the majority of Syrians (after many subsequent reconciliation missions from Rome through non-Portuguese church emissaries), were allowed by Rome to retain their own Syrian rite and came to be known as Romo-Syrians or Syrian Catholics. The Portuguese missionaries, and in particular the renowned St Francis Xavier and his followers, also made many new converts, predominantly from the lower-caste fisherfolk along the Kerala coast, and these were received into the Latin rite. The descendants of these converts (and probably also of some Syrians who remained or were kept in the Latin rite), are known as Latin Catholics.

The Portuguese missionaries also converted many Parava fishermen on the Coromandel coast. However, in the Konkan coast where the Portuguese used force besides persuasion (Damel 1990:20) they converted a substantial number of Brahmins and other upper castes. The descendants of these high caste converts to Catholicism are predominantly found in Goa and the Mangalore coast today.

In the seventeenth century the Italian Jesuit, De Nobili, and his colleagues used some innovative methods of adaptation (to be discussed below) in converting some high caste Hindus around Madurai in Tamil Nadu.

Protestant missionary endeavour began in the early eighteenth century: by the beginning of the nineteenth century militant Anglo-Saxon missionaries were active in many parts of the country, particularly in Bengal, Madras and Kerala, and were finding positive responses mostly from the lower castes.

In Kerala the London Missionary Society (LMS) concentrated its efforts among lower castes (mostly Nadars in the South) while the Church Mission Society (CMS) attempted to patronize the Jacobite (non-Catholic) Syrians apparently in the belief that such a socially advanced and high-status Indian church could become the nucleus in the task of evangelizing India. The honeymoon ended in 1834 when the Jacobites severed their connection with the CMS, but not before the latter triggered a reform movement and a schism in the Jacobite church. Out of this schism emerged the reformed Mar Thoma Syrian church which adopted many Protestant beliefs and practices.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon Protestant missions benefitted from 'a mood of unprecedented restlessness among the depressed (castes)' (Forrester 1979:73). There were mass conversion movements in many parts of the country particularly in the Madras Presidency. For example, between 1881 and 1901 the number of Protestant Christians in five districts of the Telugu country alone rose from 78,000 to 2,25,000 'and virtually all the converts were "Untouchable" Malas and Madigas' (Caplan 1987:37). And 'between 1880 and 1905 four in every five converts in the Madras Presidency were outcastes, who came, within a few decades, to comprise a majority of those adhering to the Protestant faith' (*ibid.*). Mass conversion meant that people became Christians not singly but collectively as castes and it involved little disruption of the social structure of the groups or of their relationships with their neighbours. Caplan (1989:22 and 25) has shown that caste is far more entrenched among these Christians than among the numerically fewer and

generally upper caste individual converts. The individual converts often married outside their caste and many of them consciously repudiated caste.

In Kerala these conversion movements produced a new Christian caste (or caste cluster), the Puthukristianikal (New Christians or Neo-Christians) of Dalits (predominantly Pulaya and Paraya) as distinct from the Syrian Christians and the Latin Catholics.

In the second half of the nineteenth century both Catholic and Protestant missionaries experienced considerable success in converting the tribal population of India. Tribal areas such as the North-East hill region, the Santal Parganas and Chhotanagpur have become important Christian centres (Thomas and Taylor 1965:159-161).

It can be seen that Christians in India are concentrated in certain pockets in the country and drawn predominantly from Dalit and tribal backgrounds. Though we do not have any exact figures it is estimated that at least over 50 per cent of all Christians are Dalits (Azariah 1988:116; Kananaikal 1983:1) and 15 to 20 per cent are of tribal background (Azariah 1988:116; Thomas and Taylor 1965:163). In Tamil Nadu 65 per cent of all Catholics were Dalits in the mid-1980s (Iradayaraj 1990:23); the percentage of Dalits among the Protestants is likely to be even higher. There is also a considerable number of Christians of Shudra origin such as the Nadar Christians of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The upper caste Christians are a small minority, probably not more than 25 per cent, and a substantial proportion of these are the Syrian Christians of Kerala and the upper caste Christians of the Konkan coast.

The tribal Christians are, in general, relatively homogeneous and not internally differentiated into castes. As is well known, they made considerable gains in education and general sociocultural development as a result of the efforts of the Christian missionaries. By contrast, the vast majority of Dalit Christians experienced little mobility and gained no real improvement in their caste or social status. It would appear that the considerable opportunities provided by the Christian missions were disproportionately taken advantage of by the upper caste Christians. I would venture the guess that the

failure of the churches in improving the educational levels of Dalit Christians is directly correlated with the dominance of these churches by upper caste Christians. In any case, it is precisely in these mixed caste churches and regions that Dalit-upper caste and other inter-caste conflicts are most acute today.

Caste, Sect and Rite

Some writers have mistakenly considered different Christian sects as castes apparently on the grounds that the sects are endogamous (Ayyar 1926:60; Mandelbaum 1970:565; and Dumont 1970:203). But this is misleading, and the distinction is important in understanding caste among Indian Christians. As Fuller (1976:59) has pointed out, recruitment by hereditary membership is more important for caste identity since endogamy is (or has been till recently) widely practised among religious and denominational groups all over the world. In fact, the Syrian Christians, the Latin Catholics and the Neo-Christians (Puthukristianikal) of Kerala can and must be considered as three castes or clusters of castes and the sectarian or denominational divisions among them as belonging to another order of things. Ayyar (1926:60) himself said something similar about the Syrian Christians when he stated: 'Ethnically, the Syrian Christians are now one and the same people, and the various divisions among them are based on the differences in their religious beliefs and doctrinal changes.' Broadly, the Syrians today belong to the Catholic church, a variety of Protestant churches and three orthodox churches. The Latin Catholics are all members of the Catholic church, but so are the Syrian Catholics. The Neo-Christians too belong to a variety of sects — Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox.

There is, however, some overlap between caste and sect both because of the caste origins of the sects and because of the tendency for sects in India to be absorbed into the caste system over a long period of time. This has been particularly true as regards many Dalit sects. The very nature of mass conversion movements ensured that often a whole caste joined a particular church or sect as a caste or a

cluster of castes. Thus the Salvation Army in Kerala is in many places an entirely Pulaya-Paraya sect. In fact in a central Kerala village with which this writer is familiar, a relatively large Salvation Army church does not have a single member who is not of Pulaya or Paraya descent. Similarly there are 'one caste churches' in Tamil Nadu such as the Tirunelveli diocese of the Anglican church which had 68 per cent Nadars in 1938 (Caplan 1987:46), and there are similar overlaps in the tribal areas.

'Differentiation by rite' is an issue peculiar to the Catholics of Kerala. A rite refers to the ensemble of liturgical or ritual practices including the use of vestments and other objects, words, gestures and ceremonies. The main division in this respect is that between Syrian Catholics and Latin Catholics who use the Syrian rite and the Latin rite respectively, so called because of the use, till recently, of Cyriac and Latin in these rites. Since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s the use of these languages has been given up in favour of the vernacular, Malayalam, but the division has only become exacerbated (Koilparambil 1982). The root of the hierarchical division between the two communities, however, is their different caste origins, different caste identities and differential status assigned to them. And hence those can properly be treated as castes.

I shall now attempt to identify the most important common features or configuration of features of caste among Christians in India.

Hereditary Membership in Hierarchically Ranked Castes

In general it can be said that much like the Hindus, Christians of all varieties in India define themselves and are defined by others as members of specific endogamous groups that can be reasonably described as castes. And membership in these groups is ascribed by birth. In most cases they retain their pre-conversion identities and names (e.g., Nadar Christians, Pulaya Christians); in other cases they have historically been constituted and perceived as castes (e.g., the Syrian Christians, Latin Catholics and New Christians of Kerala). Each of these groups is accorded a specific rank within a locally or

regionally recognized hierarchy, by its own members and by others, though this status is by no means unambiguous or beyond dispute. Thus the Syrian Christians of Kerala are said to occupy a status roughly equivalent to that of the Nairs. Fuller (1976:56) states that there is a general consensus to this effect by Syrians, Nairs and others despite some other types of claims and counter-claims including the claims of some Syrians that they are equal to the Namboothiris. I have personal knowledge, however, of villages where poor Syrian tenants of Nair landlords did, in fact, occupy and accept a lower position, and were not allowed to enter Nair houses or draw water from their wells even until 40–50 years ago. On the other hand I also know of villages where prominent 'aristocratic' Syrian families occupied a higher status vis-à-vis the Nairs. But in the former villages too there have been dramatic changes with hardly any Nairs now making claims to superior rank over the Syrians who are dominant in the economic and political spheres. This example should alert us to the essential ambiguity of all caste ranking and to the fact that Christian castes are part of an overall caste system rather than a separate Christian caste system.

Christians in Kerala are generally classified into three castes (Alexander, 1977; Fuller 1976:55) namely, the Syrians, the Latin Catholics and the Neo-Christians or Puthukristianikal, although an alternative classification (Jacob and Dube 1977:340) considers the small group of Knanaya Christians (Southists) as a separate fourth caste. The Southists' claim to superiority on the basis of 'racial purity' is countered by the Northists with the claim that they are descended from Namboothiri ancestry while the former are 'half-breeds' descended from the Nair wife of Thomas of Cana. The Latin Catholics are accorded a position clearly inferior to that of the Syrians, and are classified among the 'Other Backward Classes' by the Kerala government. Even this, however, is disputed at least by a particular group of Latins called the 'seven hundreds' who claim to have been original Syrians who were absorbed into the Latin rite during Portuguese times, a claim that is by no means implausible. The Syrians, however, are anxious to preserve their higher status, and jealously maintain social exclusiveness and enforce endogamy.

The widest gap, however, is that between the Syrians and the Neo-Christians of Dalit origin. Historically, the Syrians, like the Nairs, owned slaves from the Pulaya and Paraya castes, and after the abolition of slavery, continued to maintain jajmani-like patron-client relations with these workers. The Syrians were predictably unenthusiastic, if not hostile, to the efforts of the foreign missionaries to convert the Dalits to Christianity (Jeffrey 1976:51). Nevertheless, as we have seen above, large numbers of Dalits were received into Christian churches, some already dominated by the Syrians like the CMS and Mar Thoma Church, others exclusively Dalit churches. The relationship between the Syrians and the Neo-Christians will be described below; here it is pertinent to make an important observation. The Syrian churches did not integrate the Dalit converts, but higher caste Nair and even lower Ezhava converts seem to have been integrated, so that today we cannot easily find Ezhava Christians or Nair Christians in Kerala.[1] To be sure, this was facilitated by the small numbers of converts from these castes, but there is little doubt that Untouchable status, and the ensemble of relations that went with it, has been a more important factor.

Among other Christian communities whose origins are more recent, pre-conversion caste ranks are generally maintained. Thus in Tamil Nadu distinctions among Vellala, Udaya or Nadar are important both among Catholics and Protestants. The Catholics in Goa are divided into six castes and several sub-castes (D'Costa 1977:285). Everywhere there is a clear and radical separation between caste Christians and Dalit Christians who are themselves divided into separate castes.

Commensality and Social Intercourse

Caste is an important determinant of all social intercourse and commensality among Christians. Except in Kerala which does not have a nucleated village system, Dalit Christians are physically segregated in their quarters or cheris (Wiebe and Porter 1977; Japhet 1986-87). Caste Christians do not visit these quarters, dine with the

Dalits or drink water from them. A recent study (Wiebe and Porter 1977; Japhet 1986-87) in a North Arcot village in Tamil Nadu found that the landowning Malaiman Udayan Christians do not enter the colonies of their co-religionist Adi Dravida clients for fear of pollution; Pannaiyals are sent to call them when they are needed.

Even upper caste priests do not generally visit these colonies. In Karnataka and Andhra too some Catholic priests are known to carry water with them to avoid taking water from the Dalits (Japhet 1988:176; Kananaikal 1983:21). In the village of Harobale, only 70 kilometres from Bangalore, a Catholic school run by a convent offers midday meals for children, but the Dalit children have to wash the plates and tumblers themselves whereas the other children's plates are washed by the woman cook (Japhet 1988:177). The Neo-Christians of Kerala have traditionally been landless labourers working as clients of Syrian Christian (and other upper caste) landowners and residing in the masters' lands as kudikidappukarans or hutment dwellers.[2] They did not enter Syrian Christian houses but stood in the courtyard or sat in the outer veranda to eat their meals, which were generally served in broken or inferior plates. After the meal they washed the plates themselves. The Syrians, on their part, did not enter the Dalit huts, take cooked food or even drink water. In the presence of their Syrian Christian masters the Neo-Christians assumed a humble posture holding their hands across their mouth and addressed them in honorific terms as paniko or thampuran (master). They were, in turn, addressed with caste suffixes such as 'Chacko-Pulayan' or 'Yohannan Parayan'. It is interesting to note that the Neo-Christians used kinship terms in addressing the Syrians (something not done in the case of non-Christian upper castes) such as achayan (father) and kochamma (aunt) (Tharamangalam 1981:57-58).

Significant changes have taken place in these patterns in Kerala. Nevertheless, there are important continuities. Many of the older generation continue to use the honorific appellations for their Syrian patrons, but caste appellations for the Neo-Christians are no longer in use. Neo-Christians and Syrians do not enter each other's houses freely, but there are no strict prohibitions. Dining together at each

other's houses is very rare, but this is also dependent on socio-economic status, and as we shall see below, is rarely governed by notions of pollution today. It is therefore important to stress the point, noted by several recent writers (Berreman 1972:578-9; Barnett 1973:155; Caplan 1987:7 and 1989) regarding the 'retreat' of caste in the context of modern, particularly urban life. The evidence suggests that this may be more true among educated Christians than among the Hindus.

Segregation at the 'Lord's Table'

Max Weber (1958:37-38) thought that the principle of the equality of believers at the Lord's table was established at Antioch as a result of the dispute between Peter and Paul and that it marked a turning point in history. A major thrust of Protestant missionary policy with respect to caste was its opposition to any public recognition of caste in the ritual context (Caplan 1989:134). Yet a pattern of segregation has been common in church worship which is an acknowledged source of embarrassment in contemporary church discourse. There are three aspects of such segregation. First, since caste has been a major determinant of denominational choices in conversion movements, denominational segregation and cleavage also reflect caste. Thus, for example, almost exclusively Dalit sects such as the Salvation Army have their own churches in Kerala.

Second, the Syrian-Latin Catholic division in Kerala is legitimized and maintained by recourse to the Syrian and Latin rites, but show many important features of caste. Two parallel churches and two parallel sets of institutions, dioceses, bishops, priests, churches, colleges and hospitals, are maintained even in the same city. There is evidence that it is the Syrians who are keen on perpetuating the segregation (Koilparambil 1982; Alexander 1977).

The most radical and most persistent segregation has been that of Dalit Christians within the same denomination and rite. There are two ways this is done — separate churches exclusively for Dalits or separate places and seats assigned to them within the same church.

In the larger and mixed churches of Kerala (the CSI, the Mar Thoma and the Catholic churches) the general pattern has been to have separate, segregated churches for their Dalit members and these have been called 'Pulaya pally' (Pulaya church) and 'Paraya pally' (Paraya church). However, there are also non-segregated churches (especially CSI and Catholic) in which Syrian and Neo-Christian members attend church together. In Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, Dalit Catholics are known to have separate churches, or occupy segregated areas within the same church. In the North Arcot Catholic parish referred to above, a French missionary and parish priest tried to eliminate segregated places for the Adi Dravidas in the church. Many of the Malaiman Udayans not only revolted against the parish priest and temporarily withdrew from the church, but even physically attacked the Adi Dravidas for 'taking advantage of the new arrangements' (Weibe and Porter 1977:45). The erring parish priest had to be removed by the bishop before peace could be restored. Segregation continues today and the Dalits occupy the row on the left. Segregation also implies differential access to many aspects of the ritual life of the churches. Thus in Tamil Nadu 'Dalit Christians are also not allowed to serve at Mass, sing in church choir or be lectors of sacred Scripture. Some parishes have two cemeteries, one for the high castes, one for the Dalits' (Antony Raj 1990:8). In Goa, all Catholics attend the same parishes but maintain two separate *confrarias* or confraternities for the upper and the lower castes and these are referred to as 'major confraternity' and 'minor confraternity'. 'These confraternities functioned separately, and the celebration of certain religious festivals between the two caste confraternities can be compared to the worship of caste deities among Hindus' (D'Costa 1977:288).

Pollution

The issue of pollution among Christians is somewhat problematic since it is difficult to present any clear-cut pattern in their practices and much less in their conceptions in this respect. Quite apart from

the great variations among Christians, their conceptions and rationalizations of what appear to be pollution practices are also complex. Many Christians, for example, interpret and explain their behaviour in secular terms (hygiene, vestiges of the past, habit, pan-Indian culture), rather than in terms of any specifically Hindu concept of purity. With this caveat let us begin examining pollution among the Syrian Christians. We are immediately presented with a certain anomaly. The high caste status accorded to the Syrians is simply inconsistent with their dietary habits and their liberal association with polluting occupations and objects, at least by the Hindu religious conceptions of status as defined by Dumont. They freely eat beef, pork and fish, and work as fish and leather dealers and butchers.[3] To be sure, they practised untouchability and observed pollution rules in the past, and even today commensality and social intercourse between the Syrians and Dalits is highly restricted. However, there is not only a general laxity about these practices, but they have become very dependent upon the economic and social status of the Dalits concerned. I have personally seen higher status Harijans being entertained in Syrian Christian homes. In the Kerala village referred to above, even 30–40 years ago the Paraya Christian headmaster of the Salvation Army primary school used to be received in Syrian homes and offered chairs inside the house. Similarly, a Paraya Christian Carnatic music teacher used to visit Syrian homes and give regular music lessons to young Syrian girls. It may also be noted that in this same village all Syrian families (including the three wealthiest families) sent their children to the predominantly Dalit Salvation Army primary school known as Para pallikoodam (Paraya school). By contrast every single upper caste (Nair) Hindu family sent its children to the government school more than a mile away known to be a predominantly Nair school. In the Salvation Army school the Syrian children sat shoulder to shoulder with the Pulaya and Paraya children, playing with them, sharing their candies and nuts. And this was not an issue that bothered any Syrian family.

Fuller's statement (1976:64) that Syrian Christians have no concept of bodily pollution provoked some controversy (Eichinger 1976:591-2). Fuller was possibly not fully aware of the complexity

and heterogeneity of these practices. We have seen that most practices of bodily pollution were anathematized by the Synod of Diamper (with the backing of the inquisition). Possibly this had some effect for it is the non-Catholic Syrians, notably the Jacobites, who observe bodily pollution — at least many of them certainly did so even 30–40 years ago. Jacobite women did not attend church, and especially refrained from receiving communion, during their menses. Similarly they abstain even today from attending church for a period of 40 days after childbirth. The practice is facilitated by the fact that Jacobite infants are not baptised or expected to be presented in the church before 40 days. It should be noted that very rapid changes are taking place in the attitudes and practices of Keralites and that practices of bodily pollution are quite rare today. Similar taboos are observed by Protestant Christian women even in cosmopolitan Madras, albeit in a substantially modified form. Thus Caplan (1989:137) notes that many women are still reluctant to enter a church or, more especially, receive communion during their menses. Yet urban women today are neither segregated nor do they refrain from cooking during menstruation.

In Kerala, Dalit Christians too have recently given up some practices that marked them as Untouchables even in Syrian Christian eyes. Two examples of these are eating carrion and eating food left over in banana leaves (echilu) after Syrian Christian feasts. The political and cultural changes that radicalized the low classes in Kerala after the 1950s have simply swept away such practices.

Unlike the Syrian Christians, caste Christians in many other parts of India abstain from eating beef and sometimes also pork. Caplan notes that the majority of the Protestant Christians of Madras do not eat beef or pork. However, they do not see these in terms of the Hindu idea of pollution, but simply as part of 'a more general All-India cultural system' (1989:138).

Caste Endogamy

Christians in general practice caste endogamy. Moreover caste endogamy appears to take precedence over denominational endogamy. In Kerala it is common for Syrians to marry across

denominations though this was less common in the past among Catholics since the Catholic church did not approve marriages with 'heretics' and 'schismatics'. But even Syrian Catholics have preferred marrying Jacobite or Mar Thoma Syrians to Latin Catholics.

Syrian–Latin intermarriages do take place, but these are often between wealthy Latin and poor Syrian families, and are avenues used by these Latin Christians to enhance their status (Koilparambil 1982:152; Gough 1963:196; Fuller 1976:62; Alexander 1977:63). Behera (1989:59) reports that in Orissa tribal Christians prefer marrying Hindus from their own tribe to Christians from a different tribe and denomination. However, it is necessary to make an important qualification. The endogamous units among many Christians tend to be caste clusters such as clean castes and Dalit castes rather than single castes. Thus Behera notes that in Orissa converts from various clean castes unite together to form a single endogamous unit after conversion (1989:61-62). The gulf between clean and unclean castes remains unbridgeable, however, although even in this respect there are more exceptions than among Hindus.

Caste, Church Politics, and New forms of Protest by Dalit Christians

Predictably caste plays an increasingly important role in church politics, especially with the transfer of power from missionary to Indian hands. As a recent writer (Matthew 1988:359) has written, 'With the disappearance of the cosmopolitan composition of church personnel from the Mission, and the arrival of the sons (and daughters) of the soil, caste is back with a bang. Watch who congratulates whom when any post is given to a person of a given caste!' There are two dimensions of caste mobilization in the churches. The first is inter-caste rivalry that permeates all church activities at all levels in terms of struggle for power and control over church resources. The second concerns the struggle of Dalit Christians whose frustrated aspirations for equality and dignity in the churches is leading to new forms of protest. Only a cursory

discussion of these issues can be attempted here.

In Kerala the rivalry between Syrian Catholics and Latin Catholics who have built two parallel churches with two sets of bishops, clergy and other institutions, is well known. In Tamil Nadu it has been reported that caste differences have posed a more formidable obstacle to church union than theological or liturgical differences. The Lutheran Vellalas of Tamil Nadu apparently kept away from the church union movement of the first half of this century for fear of domination by the more aggressive Nadars (Caplan 1987:157). And casteism may be even stronger at the highest levels of the church. Caplan reports on what came to be regarded as a scandalous case involving the selection of a Vellala bishop to the Madras diocese of the CSI by bypassing the more popular and experienced Harijan incumbent assistant bishop. This election was influenced by some very important church people who held that 'because the Madras diocese was the most important in the CSI it would not do to have a Harijan bishop' (1987:162). Apparently the bitterness generated by this election was a major factor in the subsequent bifurcation of the Madras diocese and the creation of a new diocese in the North Arcot area whose predominantly Harijan population was thus allowed to escape caste Christian control (Caplan 1987:162).

The above incident highlights the increasing disaffection of the Dalit Christians (both Catholic and Protestant) who find themselves treated as second class members of the church and excluded from positions of power in the church. In Tamil Nadu Dalits form 63 per cent of all Catholics but represent only 3.09 per cent of priests, and even these are excluded from positions of power such as principals of schools and colleges and procurators. Moreover, '(E)ven this token representation is reluctantly given to the Dalits. The Dalit priests are only put in charge of parishes that have exclusively Harijan members' (Antony Raj 1989:27). In a pioneering study of caste in Kerala churches, Koshy (1968:45) reported: '(I) in the Mar Thoma church and the Jacobite (Orthodox) church there are no priests ordained from the backward classes. The backward class Christians in the Mar Thoma church would point this out as one of their main grievances.'

The Dalit Christians' disillusionment is twofold. The advantages that conversion once offered under missionary patronage have largely disappeared. And they are denied the advantages of Scheduled Caste status by the Government of India because of their profession of Christianity (Kananaikal 1983).[4] The reaction of the Dalits have been of three kinds. First, many have (in most cases quietly) left the Christian fold and reconverted to Hinduism thus also qualifying for the privileges accorded to Scheduled Castes. Thus in Tamil Nadu, according to official government reports, 1,321 Christian Dalits joined Hinduism between July 1980 to June 1981, and 1,243 did so between June 1981 and February 1983 (Damel 1990:27). Similar incidents have been found by researchers in Kerala (Fuller 1976:58), including the author.

A second form of Dalit protest has given rise to exclusively Dalit churches either through secession from mainstream churches or through the founding of altogether new Dalit churches with new Dalit ideologies. The best known case of secessionist movements is that in the Madhya Kerala diocese of the Church of South India. Although more than half of the members of this diocese were Dalits, diocesan affairs were dominated by upper caste Syrians who in the 1960s held nearly four-fifths of the Diocesan council's membership (Caplan 1987:160).

Two decades of agitation which at times even led to violence and police action culminated in the formation of a separatist church by some 20,000 Dalits. The new church was subsequently admitted into the International Council of Christian Churches; the Rev. V. J. Stephen, the leader of the movement, was consecrated bishop, and many catechists were ordained priests (Koshy 1968:79). Although Bishop Stephen was the only one out of the fourteen Dalit clergymen in the Madhya Kerala diocese to leave the CSI, it was nevertheless seen as a significant event among Dalit Christians. 'There are many backward class people,' writes Koshy (1968:79), 'who look upon this as a great event in their history. Even backward class people belonging to the Hindu fold openly came forward to felicitate the new bishop.'

The emergence of new churches founded by Dalits with Dalit

ideologies is an interesting phenomenon not yet documented by social scientists. Two such churches in Kerala have attracted some attention (Alexander 1977:57-58). The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha or PRDS (God's Church of Visible Salvation) founded by a Pulaya Christian, and the Cheramar Daiva Sabha (Church of God of Cheramars or Pulayas), also founded by a Pulaya Christian, preach the message of the liberation of Dalits as a major aspect of the Christian message. Both have attracted some followers including a few Syrians and established congregations.

The most important form of Dalit Christian protest is seen in the emerging Dalit Christian movement within the churches, now inspired by liberation theology and an emerging Dalit theology. Dalit theology sees Christianity itself as a movement of Dalits and the Christian message as essentially a movement for the liberation of Dalits (Nirmal 1990).

Caste and Church Discourse

To the Syrian Christians of pre-Portuguese Kerala there was nothing problematic about caste. They were a high caste among castes, they owned slaves, observed the general caste practices including untouchability, and showed little interest in proselytizing. But European missionary approach to conversion altered the scene irrevocably. The Syrians refused to admit into their churches the new Pulaya and Mukkuva converts who were forced to sit near the porch. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu the Portuguese had to build separate churches for the Kareyars and the Pulayas whom the Mukkuvars refused to admit into their churches. Soon the beef-eating and liquor-drinking Portuguese who constantly associated with the Untouchables were assigned a 'caste' status, Parangis; their low-caste converts became Kulam pukkus which meant those who had entered a new caste, the caste of the Parangis. And the Christian religion became Parangi Margam, the religion or way of the Parangis. As a new sect and a new (Untouchable) caste, the Christians (missionaries and their converts), particularly in interior Tamil Nadu, were denied all

access to upper caste Hindus (Rajamanickam 1988:302-3).

The first European missionary to attempt a solution to the problem was the renowned Italian Jesuit, Robert De Nobili of the Madurai mission, who arrived in India in 1606. Drawing heavily on early Christian traditions of adaptation he formulated and initiated a method that would make Christians of Indians without disturbing or interfering with their social and civil customs including caste (Rajamanickam 1967:56). He soon learned Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu, studied the Indian sacred texts, adopted the lifestyle of a Hindu sanyasi, built ashrams, and engaged Brahmins and other high castes in religious discourse. He and his small group of Brahmin Sanyasi missionaries made many Brahmin converts who were allowed to keep their customs including the sacred thread and the kudumi. These missionaries, however, soon found themselves in a serious dilemma when some lower castes too expressed an interest in receiving instruction and becoming Christians. Their attempts to maintain secret relations with the lower castes led to persecution by upper castes (Francis 1988:322). It was decided, therefore, to have a separate group of missionaries for the lower castes. These Pandarasamys, who did not have to be Sanskrit scholars or vegetarians, initiated the Vellala ascetics who, though non-Brahmin upper castes, had low-caste disciples. Both the Brahmin sanyasis and the Pandarasamys disappeared after the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773.

De Nobili's method of accepting caste and caste segregation within the church was approved by the Catholic church authorities in Rome only after considerable debate and with many reservations. In particular it should be noted that acceptance of caste was tactical, 'to condone the caste system in order to destroy it' (Rajamanickam 1967:63). As we have seen, the missionaries' hope that Christian beliefs and practices would eventually effect a complete change in attitudes towards caste was belied by later history.

Unlike Catholics, Anglo-Saxon Protestant missionaries aggressively and consistently attacked caste and carried on a relentless onslaught against it as being inconsistent with Christianity. Caste was seen, in the words of a militant preacher, as 'the most

cursed invention of the devil that ever existed . . . the masterpiece of hell' (Forrester 1979:27). And the influential Anglican bishop, Daniel Wilson of Calcutta, simply declared that 'the distinction of caste . . . must be abandoned decidedly, immediately, finally . . .' (Forrester 1979:38). It is remarkable that this stance was adopted not only by the early 'dissenters' from the lower classes who had been influenced by the emerging class struggles and reform movements in their own countries but also by the later liberals and conservatives of mainstream churches, who were by no means promoters of social equality in other contexts. Indeed, this position was adopted later by more understanding and less ethnocentric missionaries, and in post-colonial India by the Indian leaders of these churches. While many factors undoubtedly contributed to these missionary attitudes, it would be interesting to speculate what would have been the ideology of Protestant churches had the converts been predominantly Brahmins (or other upper castes) rather than Dalits, as was apparently the case with early Christian converts in the Roman empire and with the Syrian Christians in Kerala.

Today all churches, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, condemn caste with one voice as unchristian. The statement, issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India in 1982 is representative of all church discourse: 'We state categorically that caste, with its consequent effects on discrimination and "caste mentality", has no place in Christianity . . . It violates the God-given dignity and equality of the human person' (CBCI, 1982:148).

Conclusion

Given the vastness of India, the complexity of caste and the heterogeneity of Indian Christians, our examination of caste among Christians has perforce been selective both in terms of regions and communities covered, and in terms of the issues discussed. The Christian communities of India were recruited from different Hindu castes and tribes at different times. Neither missionary attack nor theological condemnation enabled these communities to escape their

historical milieus and the necessity to be assigned a specific rank within the overall caste system in the given region. Nor could Christians escape internal differentiation and ranking. While all major characteristics of caste are present among Christians we have seen that the ritual aspects have been considerably weakened. Where the socio-economic inequalities are not sharp and the lower castes concerned are not below the pollution line, even some mobility has been possible and some lower castes have been absorbed into higher-ranking Christian communities. Observance of bodily pollution is particularly weak both among high-ranking Christians in Kerala and Goa, and perhaps also among Christian Dalits:[5] Restrictions on commensality and other forms of social intercourse appear to be the sharpest where the distance between the groups in terms of socio-economic status and power is also the sharpest. Inter-caste relations between Christians are embedded in an ensemble of economic, social and political relations.

As regards the significance of pollution, two points must be made. First, the example of the Syrian Christians shows that a relatively 'Hinduized' group of Christians who eat beef and violate most of the pollution rules can still enjoy high caste status if they have economic and political power, and if the historical conditions are favourable. Second, when Christians do observe pollution rules it is necessary to ask how they interpret such behaviour. There are a significant number of Christians such as some of those studied by Caplan in Madras city who consciously reject caste and *a fortiori* the Hindu idea of purity and pollution. Yet they abstain from beef-eating and observe some rules of bodily pollution. But they interpret and justify these practices in terms of secular Indian culture.

Theology, Ideology and Caste

The existence of caste among Christians is often seen as an anomaly since it supposedly contradicts Christian ideas of equality. While this issue cannot be discussed here in any detail, at least a few remarks are necessary to show that the dichotomy between Christian

egalitarianism and Hindu hierarchy is a highly exaggerated if not an altogether false one. In the first place, Christianity has historically not only been the religion of highly inegalitarian societies (feudal, sexist, slave, racist) but has also often provided legitimations for these. In fact, Christian sects and movements committed to egalitarian social organizations such as the Levellers, the Diggers and the Anabaptists have generally been regarded as marginal and deviant. On the other hand, it is well known that Hindu society has also produced significant anti-caste movements committed to egalitarian ideologies. Second, and more important, institutional structures and ideologies of inequality can and do coexist with theologies that postulate equality in some ultimate (transcendental) sense. Historically the Christian theological concept of the equality of all human persons as children of the same God has not been incompatible with such ideologies as sexism, racism, and social Darwinism. At least since Marx and Weber, sociologists have been conscious of the tension that exists to some degree in all religions between conservative and radical forces, between the priest and the prophet, between ideology and utopia, between religion as the opium of the people and religion as the sigh of the oppressed classes. We can agree with Fuller that Christians generally share with Hindus an ideology in contradistinction to theology that explains and legitimates caste. But what are the contents of this ideology? It certainly does not seem to revolve around the ideas of the pure and the impure or of karma and dharma. Christians, for the most part, do not interpret their behaviour in these terms. Syrian Christian landowners may despise their Dalit workers and serve them food only in the outer veranda, but they have no hesitation in entertaining Dalit government officials or school teachers inside their houses. This does not mean that caste must be 'reduced' to economic class or political power. There is an irreducible residue, as Max Weber argued regarding status groups, but even this can be viewed in terms of such concepts as high birth, pure blood or noble descent which have universal applicability.[6] It is worth noting that De Nobili (whose name meant 'of the nobility') succeeded in establishing a common universe of discourse with the Madurai Brahmins by presenting himself as a Roman Brahmin, a person of

high and noble birth. Caste, it is argued here, can and is, at least in the case of many Christians, delinked from Hindu theological ideas of purity and pollution.

But what of Christian theology and Christian utopia? Has the Christian attack on caste and the ideology of anti-casteism had any effect on Christian practice with respect to caste? There is little doubt, I think, that it has, even if only in some limited respects. It seems clear, for example, that Christian influence has considerably eroded the idea and practice of purity and pollution. It is noteworthy that there is a minority of Christians who have consciously rejected caste and that caste has less relevance in their lives than other modern contexts such as social class. As Caplan has noted, however, the ideology of castelessness has much greater impact on those Christians who have also managed to remove themselves from their historical caste milieus, from the complex network of economic, social and political relations, in which caste is embedded. Many Protestant Christians of urban Madras have been removed from this milieu both because of their urban context and because they came to Christianity through individual rather than mass conversion movements. Caste has far less relevance for these Christians than to the landowning Malaiman Udayan Christians of North Arcot who still maintain jajmani-like relations with their Dalit Christian workers. Finally, it can be argued that both Christian theological ideas of equality and Christian proclamations of anti-casteism appear to have a sustained impact on the social movements of low-caste Christians. It appears that they retain in their collective consciousness the element of social protest that underlay the original conversion movements. And they continue to receive support from a significant minority of the Christian intelligentia including many theologians and radical members of the clergy.

Notes

1. I personally know several families of Syrian Christians who are descended from two families of Ezhava converts only a few generations ago. One set of these families, who are also wealthy, have been fully integrated although it

is not uncommon for villagers (especially their enemies) to make disparaging references to their Ezhava origins. The other families which are poor have not been equally well integrated.

2. Kudikidappukars of Kerala were given ownership rights to one-tenth of an acre of land surrounding their hut by land reforms that came into effect on 1 January 1970. See Tharamangalam 1981.
3. There is no specific occupation associated with Syrians. Historically they were traders and, at a later time, landowners and peasants. They are known to be versatile and adaptable in their occupational choices. It may not be accidental that Syrian women are present in the nursing profession in India far in excess of their proportion, a profession that appears to be looked down upon by upper caste women. Large numbers of Syrian Christian nurses have migrated to the Gulf countries and to North America.
4. The Indian government's policy of restricting Scheduled Caste status to only Dalits professing Hinduism has been criticized by non-Hindu Dalits as blatantly discriminatory in a secular society. In response to agitations and other political pressures the government has gradually extended scheduled caste status to Sikhs and neo-Buddhists of Dalit origin, but not yet to Christian Dalits.
5. I have been able to collect only limited information about bodily pollution among Dalit Christians. According to the Dalit leaders with whom I have held discussions, especially in Karnataka, Dalits have always been lax in these matters and, in any case, such practices are not common among Dalit Christians today.
6. It is noteworthy that even concepts similar to that of purity and pollution have not been unknown to non-Hindus. The Synod of Diampur condemned many pollution practices as heathen and Jewish. Concepts of the clean and the unclean were common among Jews and early Christians; like Manu, Zoroaster and Moses also thought that menstruating women were impure and had to be avoided. Ironically, some missionaries who condemned caste as unchristian also tried to keep Christians segregated from the Hindus because 'intercourse with the heathen . . . is contrary to the plain Apostolic command, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord; and touch not the unclean thing"' (Forrester 1979:43). See also Mary Douglas 1984.

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